01

JOE TAKEDUKI

《 ILLUST. 》
SHIRABII

Project
Rebirth

FANTASY INBOUND

01

Asura-Type Exo-Frame MarkIII

"RUDRA"

Table of Contents

Cover
Terminology
Prologue
Chapter 1: Project Rebirth
Chapter 2: The Flying Castle’s Reprisal
Chapter 3: Journey’s Beginning
Chapter 4: The Osakan Escape
Afterword
Color Illustrations
Bonus Translator’s Notes
About J-Novel Club
Copyright

01 CONTENTS VOLUME ONE

Prologue

Chapter 1: Project Rebirth

Chapter 2: The Flying Castle's Reprisal

Chapter 3: Journey's Beginning

Chapter 4: The Osakan Escape

ura-Type Exo-Frame MarkIII

All PRAJNA Running System
Now Booting,

Spellbook
"PRAJNA HEART SUTRA"

Gate Gate Paragate
Parasamgate
Bodhi Svaha...

Mantra Server Startup Complete.

TERMINOLOGY

— THE ASURA FRAME —

The more commonly known alias of the A-Type Exo-Frame, otherwise designated the Asura-Type. It is the ultimate weapon, a super-powered exoskeleton capable of neutralizing Anomalies upwards of threat level S+, and humanity's last hope. Only twelve exist in the world.

— DEVICER THREE —

The sole user of the Mark III Asura Frame. Unlike mass-produced Exo-Frames, only a chosen few can unleash the full power of the Asuras—a fact the inventors have impressed upon the world's governments thoroughly. Number Three was selected by Japan's Ministry of Defense and quickly became both a celebrity icon and a hero of the people.

— ANOMALIES AND PORTAL-KEEPS —

It's been many decades since the Earth became inexplicably linked to another world, bringing with it a slew of unknown creatures into our reality. The dangerous life-forms from the other side that now threaten humanity are known colloquially as Anomalies. In more recent years, enemy portal-keeps have begun to appear—entire fortresses that serve as portals which Anomaly forces use to attack en masse. Their armies are led by the keepers of these gates, the archmages.

— THE MIGRANT SAGES —

The original elves who escaped their world and found refuge on Earth. These migrants, with their characteristic pointed ears, imposing beauty, and, above all, unparalleled wisdom, are some of the brightest minds of their race and bear the title of "sage." In just a few short decades, they mastered the humans' sciences and brought about incredible innovations—including the twelve Asura Frames.

— THE ARCHMAGES —

Commanders of the enemy forces and keepers of the portals. They possess frightening magical powers, capable of controlling climate and inducing powerful earthquakes and floods. They also ally themselves with the fae. The elves refer to them as "the Chosen Dharva." It's said, however, that these mages appear more human than elvish.

Prologue

It was the spring of 202X, and Yu Ichinose lived with his family in Tokyo. He slipped his arms through the black sleeves of his brand-new uniform. It fit perfectly, but that didn't improve his mood any. What awful timing. Right at the start of his much-anticipated second year of middle school.

"I know it's, like, a big national project and all, but do I *really* need to transfer schools?"

"Aww, don't be such a grouch! Didn't you see all that stuff online? You'll get to have elf teachers! And elf classmates!" Saki, his seventeen-year-old sister, didn't seem to get it.

Yu frowned at her from across their modest living room, situated in Kita ward on the north side of Tokyo proper. "You really believe all that? Don't elves keep to themselves? I thought they all lived on reserves."

"And where do you think your new school is? Ugh, I'm so jealous! They're all so pretty, and smart, and elegant! Why can't *I* be an elf?"

Mankind was no longer the only intelligent life-form to walk the Earth. It all started some thirty years ago, when an odd creature was captured in the south of France. If the little monster's size and features weren't enough, its violent tendencies and lack of cognitive reasoning certainly fit the fiends of European folklore after which they were named: goblins.

They called it the discovery of the century. But it didn't stop there. One-eyed giants, hulking trolls, and even juvenile dragons were just a few of the sightings to follow.

Then, at the turn of the twenty-first century came the elvish migration. Fed up with the oppression of the magical ruling classes, six thousand elves fled their world, transcended their reality, and arrived in the one that Earth called home.

Yu had taken his sister's claims with a grain of salt at first, but his arrival at the institute—a facility "for the upbringing and education of junior operatives for the good of the Initiative"—would quickly prove his skepticism wrong.

"Hello. My name is Aliya Todo. First-year middle school student. As you may have already noticed from my ears, I am an elf, but my father's Japanese. It's nice to meet you."

"I can't believe she was actually right," Yu said to himself.

"My mom's an advisor at this research facility. I'll introduce you before long."

The stoic underclassman's small stature was no detriment to her beauty, and her blue-accented sailor uniform suited her well. Sharp ears poked out from her silky, ivory hair beneath a white beret. In short, she was astonishingly beautiful.

"Did you say research institute? I thought this was a school."

“To a certain extent, you could say. Suitable young people are a rarity,” Aliya replied. “And before you ask, no, I cannot use magic and neither can my mom. I hope that doesn’t offend you.”

“Ah, so you lose your powers here. Is that how it works?”

“Yes. That is how it works.”

It didn’t take long for Yu to make friends with another boy his age—Takamaru Ijuin.

“So word is they chose us ’cause we’ve got some kinda aptitude for the nanomachines or something.”

“Oh yeah, we *did* go through all those tests. They even took us to that military base, remember?” replied Yu.

Ijuin leaned forward. “You know what I heard? It’s the enemy! The Anomalies from the other side! They’ve been hitting us hard, so the guys upstairs’re trying to get this next-gen nanotech tested and battle-ready ASAP!”

“What’s the rush? *I* heard Number Three’s been putting in work.” Yu recalled the military’s renowned fighter and their latest weapon. “What was it called again? That thing that does the whole superhero transformation whatever. The something-frame Mark III.”

“You’re thinking of Devicer Three’s A-Type Exo-Frame! I’ve got the limited-edition collector’s figure, man! It comes with the whole armor set and you wouldn’t believe the quality! Oh, and get this. Our group’s going to Yokota, so we’ll get to meet the guy in person!”

“Three himself? Wow. My mom and sister are huge fans.”

The women of the Ichinose household were enraptured with the Defense Force’s new superweapon, or rather, the man behind its mask. It was hard not to be, considering his face was plastered all over national television.

Ijuin nodded emphatically. “The guy’s a hunk. Everyone and their aunt knows him. But y’know, Aliya’s actually met him and apparently he’s kind of a jerk in real life.”

“Wait, for real? The TV makes him seem like Prince Charming, though!”

Earth was under attack by creatures unknown. The Anomalies, as they were called, were relentless. They struck without warning, at any time, in any place. But amid humanity’s seemingly endless struggle against the otherworldly came the elvish migrants and their sages. Their vast intellect brought a technological revolution to every known scientific field, and yet, it had little effect on battlefields across the globe. There was one thing that not even the combined wisdom of man- and elfkind could overcome: magic.

202X CE. This was the year that the Defense Force assigned middle schooler Yu Ichinose to the Initiative and stationed him in a nanotechnology research facility as a junior operative. It was also the year that disaster struck Japan.

That June, archmages from the other side devastated the Tokyo metropolitan area with spell-induced earthquakes and floods of untold proportions, submerging the greater part of the city beneath the waves, never to resurface again. The country lost its seat of government, and to make matters worse, both the Chubu and Kansai regions fell within the grasp of enemy portal-keeps—magical strongholds through which the anomalous threat invaded.

What was left of the government fled to Fukuoka, in the southern island of Kyushu, and issued an evacuation notice to every citizen of Japan.

Nobody was safe anymore.

XXX

It was December. The end of a tumultuous year. And Maizuru Bay was in flames.

Two destroyer warships lit up Kyoto's northern waters in a fiery blaze, and every second threatened to be the vessels' last. It was a grim sight. The Defense Force was Japan's shield, and now the remainder of its paltry escort fleet was about to become wreckage at the bottom of the sea. Yu watched it burn from the shore.

"Some fight…" Ijuin muttered next to him, dressed in his plus-sized, black button-up. He was big for a fourteen-year-old.

"Everyone left after the Evacuation. All the warships. All the private liners. What are two busted up clunkers supposed to do?"

"Not much, I guess."

The conclusion shocked no one. And Yu was no exception.

He was also fourteen and clad in the same black button-up as his friend. The two of them were supposed to be middle schoolers. Instead, they were here holding automatic rifles. Type 89s, to be exact. They were lightweight, as far as firearms went, but still a hefty 3.5 kilograms and almost half a meter long. Certainly not toys.

"What are we supposed to do with these?" Ijuin grumbled. "How are *we* gonna stop anything?"

"Wish I knew." Yu couldn't agree more.

They could count on one hand the number of firing lessons they'd had, and Yu was about as scrawny as could be. Ijuin wasn't exactly the athletic type either, and he filled out his uniform quite well. Neither of them were cut out for this work, to say the least.

The boys stood out in the wide-open school courtyard, directly next to the blazing bay. The facility supposedly belonged to the Defense Force's naval branch. Officials from the Force—the few occupants who were noncombatants—looked on with nervous expressions.

"We're next, aren't we?"

"We've still got a chance, Ijuin. If we can just run out the clock, we'll make it."

Over the bay, a brilliant green aurora rippled like a giant curtain above the crestfallen boys' heads. Such a phenomenon would normally be

impossible to witness in Japan's Kansai region, but so was the floating fortress beyond the veil that created the enchanting spectacle.

An enemy portal-keep loomed overhead—a gravity-defying mass of rock with stone castle walls extending further into the heavens above. All it needed was a legion of armored knights and it would have fit the medieval aesthetic perfectly.

The JS Myoko destroyer launched an anti-air missile towards the flying castle. It rocketed upward, leaving a trail of smoke and flame behind, when suddenly, the missile sputtered out and slowed its ascent, before curving back down into the ocean below. Instead of the satisfying boom of an explosion, there was only a...

"Splash..." Yu couldn't hide his dejection.

"Did you see that?!" Ijuin cried. "That had to be magic, right?! Right?!"

Then, the two felt the nanofactors within their bodies receive a message. The "voice" of Aliya Todo, Yu and Ijuin's only female friend, echoed in their ears.

"My nanomachines are detecting magic in use. There seems to be a mage in the castle casting Projectile Protection, a spell used to shield against stones and arrows."

"Since when do guided missiles count as stones or arrows?! Man, that's kinda crazy!"

"That's just not fair," Yu sighed.

Yu had only recently gotten used to such high-tech means of communication. Commlinks allowed those augmented by nanomachines to speak telepathically with each other by way of resonance between their nanofactors, up to a range of about fifteen kilometers. Cell phones and radio seemed primitive by comparison.

Meanwhile, the battle raged on. A stealth fighter took off from the deck of the JS Izumo and fired on the portal-keep with its 25mm autocannon, simultaneously launching two air-to-air missiles. But the projectiles all met the same end as the last. The enemy's magic sent the rockets and bullets careening pitifully into the ocean. But that wasn't all.

"Dude, the plane's going down!"

Yu couldn't believe his eyes. "But I didn't even see them get hit!"

Aliya's voice returned.

"Sleep magic detected. The pilot must have lost consciousness."

On the water's surface below, three patrol copters had turned on their allies and were raining hell on the destroyers in the form of 7.62mm rounds. The warships' decks were already smoking from the air-to-surface missiles launched moments before.

"The Brainwash spell... The pilots have most likely been turned into enemy puppets."

"Agh, they're acting like cowards!" Ijuin shouted in indignation. "I thought mages were supposed to use big, flashy stuff like in manga and anime!"

“These guys are fighting to win,” Yu said quietly.

Suddenly, the floating portal-keep finally started to mobilize. Its massive gate opened wide, revealing nothing but an arcane abyss. From that darkness, a huge creature with bat-like wings emerged. There was no doubt. It was the master of drakes, the king of reptiles. The dragon beat its wings and broke into a swift flight. Ruby scales covered the length of its thirty-meter body, the mark of the red dragon, a breed known for its particular love of destruction.

“You just had to ask for big and flashy.”

“H-Hey, it’s not my fault!” Ijuin yelped.

The beast opened its maw and unleashed a torrent of raging fire as it sped through the sky, engulfing the devastated Myoko and Izumo warships and igniting the bay into an enormous bonfire. These flames weren’t ordinary, though. Once the dragon’s inferno was ablaze, it would continue to burn endlessly until whatever was lit turned to ash. Even the Izumo’s heat-resistant runway, built to endure fighter jet takeoffs, liquified in the sweltering storm.

The red dragon spewed yet more cursed flames and the Naval Defense base across Maizuru Bay combusted. The air station nearby soon followed. AA cannons fired on the winged demon without mercy, but it weaved between the bullets with frightening agility, ducking and darting like an oversized robin. It was untouchable.

XXX

Even a child could understand the severity of the situation, let alone the remnants of the Defense Force. No one was fooling themselves. They knew the score. The Force had left them behind. The Ground Defense, the Naval Defense, the Air Defense, everyone. They were the scraps.

But some clung to hope.

“The Mark III isn’t responding, sir!”

“Son of a bitch!” the colonel shouted. “If the artificial awakening signal won’t work, then find a new Devicer, damn it! We need candidates ASAP!”

The middle-aged veteran scowled at the stubborn weapon. The Humanoid Combat Unit lay on a trailer bed beneath the cloudy sky. Gold streaks along the various fringes and edges accented the otherwise pitch black suit of armor. It was like something from straight out of an anime, but unlike those super robots, this device was not to be piloted. It was to be worn.

“We can’t access the satellite system or those fifty thousand droids until we wake that thing up! I don’t care what it takes, just do it!”

As the tests continued, and continued to fail, the only thing they succeeded in waking was the colonel’s fury.

XXX

Back at Maizuru Bay, the flames consuming the Defense Force base were burning with such intensity that they seemed to scorch the heavens

themselves. But extinguishing them would have to wait. The ground assault had begun.

Squads had been situated on all sides of the frenzied bay, and in an instant, each of them were thrown into battle when hordes of Anomalies appeared out of thin air. No warning. No sign. They simply materialized from nothing, like sea foam from the sand. That was the power of magic—it could summon creatures directly on top of the opponent, just like that.

This time, it was the living dead that took the stage. The wandering husks—or zombies, as humanity liked to call them—would continue to mindlessly seek out flesh, no matter the damage they endured. The only way to defeat them was to land a decisive blow to the head or heart. Until then, their hunger could not be sated.

Hundreds of corpses emerged from the ground, wearing familiar clothing from nearby stores. The hordes stumbled and shuffled towards their prey while the ground forces lit them up in a panicked frenzy. Bullets flew, knives were brandished, guts exploded, and blood rained down. The artillerymen could do nothing against the clamoring masses and were forced to abandon their howitzers for Type 89s if they wanted to save their allies. The scene was ghastly.

Meanwhile, the dragon continued its path of destruction, completely apathetic towards the infantry below, and quickly turned the harbor into a raging fireball. Merely to eliminate the remaining moored ships.

Still, the ground troops were afforded no respite, and new foes quickly began to spawn. Dozens of three-meter-tall troll soldiers clad in iron armor took to the field, set with bulging muscles, boar-like faces, and pointed tusks protruding from their bottom lips. Their massive swords, colossal axes, and bulky clubs pulverized entire groups of puny humans with only a single swing, scattering heads, limbs, and other gore across the battlefield to the tune of cracking bones. The trolls were allied with the fae, thus giving them great command of magic. This included Projectile Protection, effectively nullifying all gunfire. That said, the spell was far less powerful than the one protecting the floating castle, and a point-blank rocket launcher blast proved exceptionally effective at blowing one of the monsters to smithereens.

Just as the humans found renewed strength in their meager success, another troll set a fire elemental upon one of the rocket launcher’s warheads. The elemental ignited the igneous essences within the explosive, and the subsequent detonation turned the surrounding area into a smoking graveyard.

Chaos reigned. Gunshots. Screams. Cries. Blood. Death.

And then, in an instant, it stopped. The trolls and zombies vanished. The slaughter was over as quickly as it had begun.

Yu looked up and took a deep breath. “We did it. We ran out the clock.”

The green, shimmering curtain rapidly faded, and the cold winter clouds monopolized the skies of Kansai once more. The floating castle vanished like a mirage along with all its mystical splendor.

Without a portal-keep, the aurora couldn't linger any longer. The two were linked, and the presence of one meant the other. When the heavens started to glow, Anomalies were near, and when it stopped, the nightmare would end. Just like that. Humanity's foes were veritable phantoms.

"Oh my *God*!" Ijuin cried in relief. "I thought we'd be stuck like this for another month or two!"

"The enemy's mana reserves were drained from previous battles around the area," came Aliya's voice. "At least, that's what mom said. They couldn't maintain a material form in this realm for much longer. But how much longer can we keep this up..."

Yu looked down at his right hand, at the ring of light glowing in his palm indicating the activation of his bodily nanofactors, before looking back up. He clenched his fist as he stared across the bay, where the Defense Force's garrison continued to burn.

Gorogatake's rolling hills stretched all the way into downtown Maizuru, and at the top of the mountain, three hundred meters above sea level, stood an observation tower. What used to be a popular public park had been appropriated by the Defense Force for military purposes. There was once a time when the scenic views used to captivate visitors, but now several military officers stared at the destruction below in deafening silence.

Special research advisor Chloe Todo sympathized with them as they looked down upon the flames and the corpses of their allies with horrified expressions. Her only daughter clung to her white coat.

"What do we do now, mom?"

"We go down the mountain and regroup with the survivors," Chloe replied plainly. She was no stranger to war. "Start rescue efforts, set up shelter somewhere."

Aliya's ears, although noticeably longer than a human's, only tapered off just past her light brown hair. Her mother's, however, were far more prominent. Professor Chloe Todo had spent the last twenty-something years of her life in this foreign world, and in that time she'd married a Japanese man and given birth to a child. A child of two realms, two realities, two bloods.

She approached an official alongside her frightened daughter. "We should go, Colonel."

"We need the Mark III," the middle-aged human said. "This cannot happen again. I know you agree."

The majority of Gorogatake's population were specialists: engineers and scientists conducting Exo-Frame research. Chloe was their counsel. The only military personnel present were the Air Defense colonel and his subordinates.

“You said so yourself, Professor. The Mark III has lost its Devicer, but we can still awaken it, even if only artificially,” continued the colonel.

The professor had indeed suggested alternative means of reviving the Exo-Frame beyond searching for a new Devicer. This, she conceded. But now, while his military burned, was not the time to be discussing such matters. There was no calm or willingness to listen in the colonel’s eyes, though. Only desperation. So she bit her tongue.

“I understand. I’ll look into it.”

“We’re counting on you!” barked the colonel.

Chloe heaved a sigh the moment the officer turned away. Their ultimate weapon, a super-powered suit of armor known as the A-Type Exo-Frame Mark III, slept peacefully on the trailer bed, its golden streaks dead and dormant. They hadn’t glowed in months now. Understaffed and short on resources, the elf scientist wasn’t optimistic that they ever would again.

She looked back at the observation tower looming fifty meters overhead. After becoming the headquarters for the Defense Force’s operation and study of the Asura-Type Exo-Frame, the retired tourist attraction had found yet another purpose—the heights of Gorogatake were their only hope to re-imbue the Mark III with its astral power.

“It would be nice if she would help.”

“Who?” Aliya asked.

“The princess of our kingdom. Remind me to tell you about her one day.”

Chloe’s daughter tilted her head as the migrant sage gazed upwards. It was the winter of 202X, and the skies above Maizuru were cloudy.

Chapter 1: Project Rebirth

1

The end of March was fast approaching. It was spring, several months after the catastrophe in December, and Yu Ichinose was still in Maizuru. It wasn't like he had any places to be or a way to get there anyway.

"Figures that all the boats and planes got burned up by the dragon." Yu stared lazily at the sunset.

"Probably shouldn't chance taking the roads. Too dangerous," said Ijuin, sitting next to him on the grass. "Especially through the mountains. I hear lots of Anomalies are wandering around places like that."

"Yeah, it takes them about a month or two to disappear once they arrive."

"Right. Until they run outta magic. Use too much of it and they'll get forced back to the other side. Like before." The two boys got together to exchange information like this often. Their plan needed to be airtight. "No way am I spending the rest of my life in this rotten place! I can't wait to bust outta here and run off to Kyushu or Hokkaido! If we can't make it home, I mean."

"I can't go back to Kanto, Ijuin. It's a pile of rubble now, and flooded even worse than here." Compared to his hotheaded, Yokohama-born, Yamate-raised friend, Yu the Tokyoite city boy was quite calm.

The two watched the sun set behind a distant ridgeline from the top of Mount Gorogatake—the best seats in the city. Its brilliant, crimson rays stretched as far as the hills of the old province of Tamba and glistened on the waters of Wakasa and the Sea of Japan to the north.

But it was hardly a moving spectacle.

"Things will never go back to normal, will they?"

"Professor Chloe says that the five elements of Honshu—what were they again?" Ijuin racked his brain. "Earth, water, fire, wind, and…void? Anyway, the water element's out of whack, and that's why the rivers have been flooding. She said a bunch of other mumbo jumbo too, but I don't get any of that magic-speak. Ex-mages, am I right?"

As the sun approached its final moments above the horizon, the sky burned red, illuminating downtown Maizuru as it rippled beneath the waves. Most of the city was dotted with hills and mountains, but the majority of the flatlands in between were now completely underwater. The summit they sat on was too high to conveniently launch any boats from, but they very well could have elsewhere. If only they'd had one.

Seven or eight meters below the clear surface, the vestiges of society rested on the ocean floor—the harbor, houses, the Maizuru Line railways, the train station, cozy shopping districts, temples and shrines, the old castle town, and even the ruins of the Defense Force base.

Yu sighed. "Just like Kanto. I can't believe it happened again."

“Wonder if it’s like this all over Japan,” replied Ijuin.

“We’re definitely not the only ones without water or electricity, at least.”

“Yeah, not a chance. Everywhere’s on its last legs. Pretty much all of Honshu’s on the brink, and things aren’t getting any better. Radio would be nice, though.”

“The portal-keeps interfere with the radio waves too much, so that might be a tall order.”

The boys picked themselves up and trudged across the mountaintop. What once was Gorogatake Park and then a Defense Force research facility, was now serving as a provisionary outpost for surviving members of the Force. A large warehouse acted as shelter for civilian refugees who had arrived via rescue boats.

“Didn’t some new people show up not too long ago?” Yu muttered.

“Yeah, they drove all the way here from Fukui prefecture. There ended up being less rescue boats than they said they’d have, so it doesn’t surprise me that some people missed their shot. No one’s gettin’ any food or help sitting at home,” pointed out Ijuin. “Sooner or later, Anomalies come knocking.”

“And anyone still around Maizuru’s gonna be here.”

“Think we’re at what, like, a hundred people? About seventy left in the Force, but you know what I don’t get? Why the military guys get beds and dorms while we and the refugees gotta squeeze into that warehouse like sardines! Just ain’t right,” Ijuin griped, as they arrived at the shelter.

With dozens of families crammed into the building, sharing tiny blue tarps littered with their personal belongings, there simply wasn’t enough space to go around. People were exhausted and tense; it would only take a small spark for an altercation to break out.

Yu didn’t share his friend’s sentiment entirely. “At least Aliya and Professor Chloe get to keep their distance from this place.”

“Yeah, true. There’s been a lotta bad blood with the elves lately. ’Specially from Takeda. That guy’s gonna cross the line one o’ these—”

“Quiet!” Yu hushed. “He’ll hear you!”

Leading Private Takeda sauntered up to the boys with his trademark tank top and pierced ears. His tanned skin and blond-dyed hair made him out to be more like a punk than a soldier, but he was a surviving member of the Force, and that made him valuable. Not to mention the fact that his charisma made him a favorite with the higher-ups. Unfortunately, though, he never extended that kindness to the small fry.

Yu and Ijuin, who were all too familiar with his abuse, prepared themselves for the worst.

“Hey, chumps,” he spat. “Got a job for you.”

“Sorry, we can’t. Professor Chloe is waiting for—”

The twenty-five-year-old smacked Yu with his open palm before he could even finish his sentence. Hard. He stumbled on his feet while Ijuin stiffened like a board.

“Didn’t ask for your opinion. I don’t give two shits about some pointy-eared bitch’s experiments. You know what you need to do? Make yourselves useful and bring that woman and her daughter over to us. Got a few words for those Anomaly-breeds,” Takeda snarled. “Maybe I’ll make ’em my slaves, get some payback for what they did to Japan. They’ve got some fine bodies, after—”

“The professor is on our side,” Yu interrupted, unable to contain himself any longer. “And the experiments are on the colonel’s orders, not—”

Another blow. Yu felt his lip burst open and the taste of iron filled his mouth.

Takeda looked down at the boy with utter disgust. “I said I didn’t ask for your damn opinion. Some brat’s gone missing. Find him.”

A young woman timidly peered out from behind the private. Yu recognized her. She’d arrived at the camp along with two children—a two-year-old and a six-year-old.

“Maizuru’s not the best place to be lost at night,” Yu said over the rumble of his motorbike.

“I just hope he’s alive.”

Ijuin and Yu rode along the dark road, down Gorogatake and into the western side of the city, with only their headlights to illuminate the path ahead. Neither of them had a license, for whatever it was worth these days, but given the state of things, it was hard not to pick up a few skills after all they’d been through. They were comfortable driving four-wheeled vehicles as well.

That said, gasoline was precious. The bikes they’d scavenged from the city were fuel efficient by necessity. They were exceptionally handy in times like these, though.

“This is the place.”

“God!” Ijuin groaned. “How did no one notice the kid wasn’t in the car on the way back?!”

Yu, on the other hand, was spent. “Everyone’s tired. We’re all just trying to get by.”

They had come to a stop in the parking lot of a large hardware store. A few Defense officers had stopped by here in the afternoon with a military truck and a minibus with roughly ten refugees on board, tasked with scavenging for supplies and nonperishables. Everyone chipped in, from elementary schoolers to senior citizens—anyone who wasn’t already busy with fishing, gathering, farming, or any number of the many jobs that needed doing.

“The military can spout all it wants about ‘protect and serve.’ I don’t know about you, but all I’m seeing is a lotta slave-driving and not a lotta serving! You and me, Ichinose, we’ve got it bad!”

“I’d call it straight-up bullying, personally. Guess that’s what we get for being around Professor Chloe.” Yu’s left cheek still throbbed. “It sure feels like the only way Takeda’s gang can get their kicks anymore, huh?”

“We gotta get the hell outta there, fast! Take some weapons, some food, and just *go*!” Ijuin urged. “But first, we’ve got a lost kid to find!”

After two hours of walking, the urban surroundings started to give way to overgrown rice fields and cracked pavement, split apart by rampant weeds. Much of the surrounding vegetation had grown even taller than Yu. Ijuin had had it up to here with the trek.

“So there’s this famous line from a manga,” he said. “‘There’s no such thing as a weed!’ It means you shouldn’t look down on people. Every weed has its name, right? Well, if you ask me, if it grows out of freakin’ nothing, I think it counts as a weed.”

“That happens around mountains. Lots of seeds and pollen in the wind.”

Neither Yu nor Ijuin had grown up around harsh wilderness. They were modern kids, raised in modern cities. But this was a mountain town.

The boys kept their Type 89 rifles close. A survival knife and a 9mm pistol hung from each of their belts, and night vision goggles were strapped over their heads. Maizuru may have been a modern city at one point, but now, danger could be lurking anywhere.

“Aw, crap, hold on. Something’s close,” Yu said.

Some sort of beast was barking and growling nearby. Wild dogs, by the sound of it. There was a child’s wailing too. By the time Ijuin had called out to him, Yu was already sprinting towards the commotion.

“I’ll meet you there! Don’t push yourself!” Yu called back.

“R-Right, sorry, dude!”

Yu was, to put it delicately, much quicker on his feet than his partner. His slim figure aside, he used to do a fair bit of running as a midfielder, so his childhood soccer experience gave him a bit of a decisive edge in that regard.

Yu followed the noises to an expansive, one-story house next to a rice field and quickly turned the corner. A plump, middle-aged man was huddled up against the wall alongside a young boy. The two trembled in fear as five large dogs gnashed their teeth and snarled at them from all sides. The once-domesticated pets had gone completely feral and were more like bloodthirsty wolves than man’s best friend.

The boy was familiar—he was the lost child they were after—but not the man. Of course, Yu hadn’t memorized every single refugee’s face, but his stubble, glasses, and timid demeanor didn’t ring any bells.

At last, Ijuin arrived on the scene. “S-Sorry about that. Whoa, hey, we gotta help them!”

“Wait, don’t shoot!” Yu warned. “You might hit those people. You know we’re not great shots.”

Ammunition was extremely rare, so the two had few opportunities to practice their aim. Given that, Yu couldn’t help but wonder why *they* had

been the ones to get stuck with this job. He pointed his rifle up, switched it to semi-auto, and fired a few shots, each giving off a surprisingly pleasant *pop* with very little recoil. For an outdated model, it wasn't a bad gun.

The effect was instant, and the wild animals began to cautiously retreat from the foreign sounds and the strange smell of gunsmoke. But one particularly vicious-looking beast remained. It growled and flared its teeth. Yu stifled his fear.

"The thing's got eight legs!" Ijuin cried.

The monster had two pairs of front legs and two pairs of back legs. Although, all things considered, it wasn't that far-fetched during an era of sorcery.

Yu pointed the muzzle of his rifle at the creature, his heart pounding. Slowly, he crept closer. And closer. Just until he could be certain that he wouldn't miss. And then, he pulled the trigger.

Pop!

One bullet through the head. Enemy neutralized.

2

"You two look, er, awfully young to be in the military." The chubby man eyed Yu and Ijuin's rifles as he steadied himself against the house.

Yu looked to his friend. "Um, how do we explain?"

"So, well, we're *technically* middle schoolers," Ijuin said. "But a few months before the Evacuation, we got made junior operatives, which I'm pretty sure is fancy talk for child soldiers."

"Child soldiers?!" the man cried.

Yu shrugged. "They're short on people. We do what we have to."

"We're with R&D, though," his partner explained. "See, before Japan sorta went to hell and all, the Defense Force was secretly gathering a bunch o' preteens that scored high on some kind of nanomachine aptitude test. 'Cause you gotta be augmented young for the next-gen tech, after all. Anyway, that's us."

"These are troubled times, I suppose," the man replied.

"So you from the refugee camp?" Ijuin asked. "I don't think we've met."

"At first, yes." He cracked a dry smile. "But I didn't stay long. Couldn't stand the way the officers ran the place, so I've been living here."

"Ah."

"Yup, makes sense," Yu nodded.

The bespectacled man's nerdy appearance would have certainly made him easy prey for Leading Private Takeda.

"I've been getting by relatively fine with whatever food and water I can find, but then I heard a child crying and found him with those dogs. There've been a lot of wild animals around lately." He sighed. "I guess I'll have to drag myself back to the camp at some point."

"We could take you back with us if you want," Yu offered.

“Oh, no. I’m not throwing in the towel just yet. Although…” The man offered a pitiful grin. “You wouldn’t happen to have any food, would you?”

“Thank you so, so, *so* much!” the lost child’s mother exclaimed.

She was surprisingly young—about twenty-two or twenty-three. Despite the state of the world, she still bothered to maintain her bright hair and heavy makeup. Yu had a feeling he could tell what sort of student she must have been in high school. It was pitch dark outside the shelter and most of the hundred-plus refugees had long since gone to sleep. The boy Yu and Ijuin had brought back to camp was also probably already snoozing away inside the cramped warehouse.

“I-I should go,” the mother stammered. “Need to, um, report back to Private Takeda. And stuff.”

Yu and Ijuin quietly smiled back, daring not to ask any questions. It couldn’t have been easy—being a mother so young, losing your family, and then finding your way to a place like this where food and human decency were scarce. If dolling herself up and pandering to the boys in charge was what she needed to do to provide for her kids—perhaps even score a little extra—then no amount of external judgment would stop her. Everyone was struggling, including the bespectacled man, and Yu felt a pang in his chest.

Suddenly, the woman perked up with a start. “Oh! I nearly forgot.” She struggled to find the words. “There was…something I was supposed to tell you.”

“For the love of… Why can’t they clean their own crap?!”

“This seriously needs to be done in the morning,” Yu grumbled.

It was well past midnight, and the boys sat cross-legged in the armory. Various Type 89 rifle parts lay neatly on the ground while Yu and Ijuin carefully scrubbed every piece with oil-soaked cloths. Besides soot and fingerprints, salt carried by the breeze from the nearby ocean needed to be diligently cleaned to keep the metal from rusting.

“You’d think they’d be worried about us jumping them, leaving all these guns lying around,” Ijuin said.

“Doubt it. They’re living it up right now.”

“Compared to the old SDF, the Defense Force really lowered the bar. All you gotta do to get in these days is have a resume and be eighteen. Whatever gets them more people, I guess.”

Power sources were precious and needed to be conserved, so they had to make do with leftover salad oil from the garbage to light their makeshift lamp. It didn’t actually make things that much easier to see, but it was the best they had.

Yu finished his work dexterously and started to reassemble the rifle. The most skillful soldiers could take apart their weapon and put it back together in about three minutes. But the boys were not the most skillful soldiers.

“Please take your time, Ijuin. If they find even a speck—”

“Yeah, I know! They’ll whip us both! I ain’t gonna screw up like that again.”

If they were lucky, they’d be forced to do a dozen laps and twenty push-ups, but it wasn’t uncommon for them to be pushed to the point of vomiting. At worst, they’d get to be the punching bags for every squad’s sparring sessions.

“I might not be as mad if we were aiming for baseball championships or something,” Yu complained sarcastically. “I wonder if teams who made it into nationals every year even got it this hard.”

“Dunno. I’m the indoorsy type. Never liked sports. You’d probably know better than me.” Ijuin glanced at Yu. “Didn’t you play soccer?”

“Not for school. I was on the Urawa youth team. I didn’t even bother checking out my middle school’s team, so I don’t have a clue how those guys do it.”

“What’s the difference?”

“We didn’t really have much of a hierarchy, you know? Didn’t have to clean up after the older members or anything.”

The hours flew by, and the sky was starting to brighten as the two finished and locked up the storehouse.

“Sun’s already coming up? Man, that sucks.”

“Let’s get back to the shelter,” Yu said.

“Eh, we’ll have to wake up soon anyway.” Ijuin looked out at the first cracks of lapis on the horizon, his eyes brimming with excitement all of a sudden. “Hey, come with me a sec! Got a new trick to show ya!”

Before becoming a military outpost, Gorogatake’s summit had been a popular park for tourists. These days, though, research labs and warehouses occupied the area. When power to the region had failed completely, the park’s own array of solar panels and large windmills equipped with superconductive motors managed to keep the site running. Even today, they continued to provide a sufficient, yet meager, amount of energy. Overlooking the monolithic turbines was the fifty-meter observation tower—the last trace of the park’s history as a sightseeing hotspot. A sort of huge, conch-shaped antenna rested at the top.

Yu tilted his head quizzically at it. “I wonder what they’re using this place for. Professor Chloe will never tell me.”

“My guess is it’s an observatory or something. The antenna looks like some kinda radar thing to me,” Ijuin replied. “Anyway, that’s not important. You know how only officers with the right keycard can get inside?”

The entrance to the tower—a thick, automatic door—was shut tight. Installed next to it was a console with a small slit, just big enough to fit a card in, and a hemispherical nanomachine interface.

Ijuin touched the hemisphere, and after a few electronic beeps, he muttered, “Watch this.”

Yu jumped as the door swished open. “How did you do that?!”

“The awakening experiments.” Ijuin opened his right palm, revealing the ring of light. “I think I picked it up somehow along the way. Been using the nanomachines a lot.”

“So what, you like, hacked the terminal?” Yu asked excitedly.

“Something like that, yeah. All I gotta do is touch something with a nanotech interface and I just kinda know how it works. You know, they kept talking about aptitude this, aptitude that, but I’ve never actually felt *useful* until now!”

“Dang, man. Nice going.”

Their pathway was clear. Beyond the mysterious door to the unknown was an ordinary reception desk. Perhaps a remnant of the tower’s days as a tourist attraction.

“So, Ijuin. What do you say we take a look inside?”

“Could always use more info for the escape plan.”

“I really hope there aren’t any security cameras in here,” Yu said.

“Lemme check.” Ijuin closed his eyes and touched a hemispherical nanotech device conveniently placed on a nearby wall. “There aren’t any in this hallway, that’s for sure. Actually, the whole tower’s in low power mode. Pretty much the only things that move are the front door and the elevator. I mean, even if there *were* cameras, there aren’t enough people to watch them anyway.”

Yu was thoroughly impressed. “Wow, you’re like a super hacker from some manga.”

“It doesn’t really feel like it, though. It’s less computer-y and more...tactile. I just touch it and I understand the mechanisms. ‘Don’t think. Feel,’ you know? Anyway, the top floor looks like the most important.”

They stepped into the elevator and rode it all the way up. They arrived on a floor enclosed with glass, wrapping around the full three-sixty degrees. They could see for miles. Sizable wooden boxes littered the floor and countless cables crisscrossed throughout the walking space, making the room a treacherous maze to traverse.

Yu carefully navigated his way up to the window and looked north across Maizuru Bay, over to the greater Wakasa Bay beyond. Although it was only the size of his fingertip from this far, he could even make out the enigmatic mass floating in the distance. Heaven-piercing ramparts sat distinctly upon the massive lump of levitating stone.

“I can see the portal,” he mumbled.

“Ichinose! Check this out!”

Ijuin pointed at a rectangular, glass case filled with blue liquid. A young girl was floating inside, completely naked. Her hair was a dark midnight blue, and despite her eyes being delicately closed, their striking beauty was plain to see. Bubbles occasionally rose from her peach-colored lips. But what stood out about her most were her long, pointed ears.

“She’s an elf!” Yu gasped.

“Her ears look just like Professor Chloe’s. What *is* this? It’s like some sci-fi cryosleep pod.”

There was another interface terminal on her container. Ijuin touched it and closed his eyes.

“Code name…” He furrowed his brow. “Replicant. Argh, that’s all I can get without the right credentials.”

“Replicant?” inquired Yu.

“Oh, I heard some rumors online a while back, actually. Stuff about people sealing migrant elves in capsules and using them like slaves for their knowledge and magic. I read that militaries around the world were in on the research.”

“If this girl is a slave, then this is wrong!”

“Let’s ask the professor about it the next chance we get. We can’t stick around here.”

The break of dawn was approaching. The sun was beginning to peek above the Tamba Highlands to the east, and it would soon be well and truly morning. The elf girl continued to sleep, even as the sun’s rays fell over her. She looked to be about fifteen or sixteen, and she wore not a single thread or object to hide her limp body from view. Yu looked away, blushing. Ijuin was right. It was time to leave.

Just as Yu turned to follow his partner out, he felt a shock run down his spine like lightning. He whipped back around to look at the girl. Behind her closed, elegant eyes, he could have sworn he felt something. A message.

“Long have I waited for you.”

3

Yu and Ijuin met the morning after their long, sleepless night with punishment.

Leading Private Takeda beheld the pristine row of rifles, and all he had to say was, “You call that clean?”

The boys weren’t surprised. Frankly, they’d expected worse.

And so, they found themselves spending the early hours of their day cutting grass around the camp. When their battle against the rampant weeds was decided, however, the *real* battle began.

“I thought you played ball, boy. Where’s your muscles?”

Yu felt the impact against his headgear. Private Takeda stood opposite him, wearing the same sparring gloves and headpiece. Several others watched from the sidelines, everyone but Ijuin grinning sadistically every time Yu took a blow.

“T-Tag me in, Ichinose!” he shouted.

“Quiet, fatty!” Takeda shot back, throwing a few more jabs. “You switch when I say you switch!”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Yu threw up his hands and endured the endless strikes to his head. The fight was laughably one-sided. He didn't have a chance of landing a hit himself, so the best he could do was try to minimize the damage he was receiving. Takeda was an ace at hand-to-hand combat and a demon on the offensive, and if that weren't bad enough, he was built like a truck at one-eighty centimeters tall and seventy kilos heavy. A little too far outside the weight class of a middle schooler.

"Look at you. All skin and bone. Careful, or the wind might blow ya away!" Takeda sneered and launched Yu away with a swift, spinning mid kick. "What'd I tell you?"

I'm doing it on purpose, Yu quietly argued. He'd learned something from all the constant beatings recently. *Idiot*.

Really, as far as Yu was concerned, actually taking hits was optional. The trick was to loosen up, relax at the moment of impact, and bend with it. Never take it head on. All the better if the shock blew him away. Anything to weaken the blow. That was Yu's strategy. To him, weak didn't mean helpless. Truth be told, he'd explained all this to Ijuin before, but according to his friend, he was nuts for even being able to think about that sort of thing while getting his brains knocked around.

Yu was prepared to stand his ground for however long it would take until his opponent tired himself out, but this time, he didn't have to wait that long.

"What's going on here?" a woman's stern voice interrupted the ruckus. "I believe those two are on *my* research staff. There may not be enough hands to go around, but I don't recall anyone giving you the authority to obstruct the work of my associates."

Pointed ears jutted through her blonde hair that rested just above the shoulders of her white lab coat. Her handsome, yet delicate features appeared somehow both human and decidedly *in*human at the same time. The migrant sage's Japanese name was Chloe Todo, on account of elvish names being notoriously long and difficult to remember.

She was a migrant from the other side, one of the many elves to have fled their world all those years ago. An architect of the advancements brought about by the harmonious fusion between elvish wisdom and human science, and an authority on state-of-the-art nanotechnology.

Finally freed from their own personal hell, Yu and Ijuin tailed behind Chloe through the freshly tended-to grass. Her skin was smooth as clay and pale white; however, her striking features weren't quite as defined as a typical Caucasian's. She kept her light gold hair tied up neatly in a bun. She always reminded Yu of a statue he'd seen of a bodhisattva on a school trip to a temple in Nara. Especially its sharp eyes and that mysterious "archaic smile."

"Thank you for coming to find us," Yu said, remembering they hadn't expressed their gratitude yet.

“Don’t mention it. The *colonel’s* always worrying his hair off over ‘morale,’ but I’m more concerned with the state of order around here.” Professor Chloe spoke in flawlessly fluent Japanese. “I just wish I could do more to protect you.”

“Hey, it’s nice knowing there’s someone reasonable around here,” Ijuin said.

The colonel was the highest rank among the surviving officers, making him the camp’s de facto leader.

“So, what are the chances of help coming?” Yu asked flat out. “Realistically speaking.”

Chloe didn’t mince words. “Realistically? I’d say zero. We have no means of wireless communication as long as the portal-keeps are around.”

“Figures.”

“Yeah, they knew what they were doing, goin’ straight for Tokyo,” Ijuin grumbled. “Turned Nagatacho and Ichigaya into debris, and the government’s gone quiet ever since they ran to Kyushu. It’s not looking good for us, huh?”

“That’s certainly a part of the problem, but not entirely. Remember I said *wireless* communication. That doesn’t mean we couldn’t send a messenger or two.” Chloe hesitated for a moment. “I suppose there’s no point in keeping it a secret anymore. The truth is, the colonel’s isolating the camp from the outside on purpose.”

“Why?!” Ijuin cried.

“He doesn’t want to lose our last hope. What’s left of Japan’s government doesn’t have the resources to send out rescue teams, so if help ever *does* come, it would be from a foreign power. And if that happened, they’d almost certainly seize the Mark III.”

“Devicer Three’s suit?” Yu put the pieces together. “The thing we’ve been doing all these experiments to wake up?!”

The future the professor predicted was not a bright one.

“You’re late.”

The ivory-haired girl was waiting in the underground hangar beneath Lab Four with a subtle pout on her face. She wore the female counterpart to Yu and Ijuin’s black button-up—a white sailor uniform with a blue collar and ribbon, black knee-high socks, and a white, striped beret that completed the outfit.

“I hope the *dynamic duo* over there isn’t rubbing off on you, mom.”

Aliya Todo, thirteen, was the only daughter of the elf nanotechnologist Chloe Todo, as evidenced by her slightly longer than average ears.

In front of the huffy girl hung a full-body supersuit, but it wasn’t your average muscle-enhancing exoskeleton. It was an A-Type Exo-Frame. The Asura-Type.

Better known as the Asura Frame.

The jet-black ADAMAS-armored plating combined unrivaled strength with impossible, rubber-like flexibility and ease of use. Streaks of gold along the matte finish kept it looking rather stylish as well.

It was the ultimate weapon. The brainchild of twenty-first century science and otherworldly insight. An artificial titan of destruction.

4

About half of Maizuru was underwater. What wasn’t flooded was a ghost town, inhabited only by strutting birds and the occasional wild dog, monkey, or deer that had strayed from the mountains. The same poster was plastered at every corner, on nearly every derelict building, with the exact same message: “Protect Our Future! Join The Force!” The letters were as faded as their meaning.

Each recruitment flyer starred a face, but not of a famous actor, or even an anime character. Only a comely, mortal young man. A soldier outfitted in a pitch-black suit accented by gold streaks, carrying a helmet under his arm. All of Japan knew his title—you would have been crazy not to—but fewer knew his real name.

He was one of the few chosen to don an Asura Frame. A war hero who’d been bearing the brunt of the front lines for close to three years now. He was Devicer Three, and he was Japan’s savior.

Survivors around the city with nowhere else to go gathered at Gorogatake and were being kept in an emptied warehouse. But the makeshift refugee camp was just that, makeshift, and it could barely contain the population of over a hundred. People crammed together and slept on the hard floor without a hint of privacy. Of course, anyone could take up shelter in one of the many abandoned houses, but they would be giving up the regular supply of food, water, and electricity that only the camp could provide. It wasn’t much, but at least it was something. What kept people glued to the ruined military facility most firmly, though, was fear of the wild animals that roamed about. And of the enemy that could strike at any moment.

Life was hard, no one was happy, but they made it work. Power was precious, and when lights-out was called at precisely 1700 hours each night, they had to either grasp about in the dark or settle for candles or lamps fueled with salad oil if they wanted sources of illumination. But at least they still had him—the black and gold warrior.

A young boy clung to a matte-black figure of his armored likeness while an older man flipped through an antiquated, crumpled newspaper, skimming over articles from the past.

“Devicer Three Arrives at the Hokkaido Front!”

“Anomalies Neutralized”

“Swift Victory Against the Unidentified Life-Forms”

The man sighed. The black and gold warrior once toured all over Japan, defending the nation like a dream synthesis of mecha anime and American superhero movies come to life in one suit of armor. He was a symbol of peace. He was the one.

The *only* one.

Elsewhere, the few remaining commissioned officers of the Defense Force enjoyed their own private quarters. Lower ranking soldiers and enlisted refugees shared a common room, but were still provided crude beds to sleep on. It was a far cry from the warehouse, that was for sure.

Private Takeda was having the time of his life, surrounded by his so-called “war buds” and livening up the place with vulgarities about the women around camp that he indulged in “comfort” with. Most of the conversation consisted of obscene anecdotes that would have offended any halfway decent human being. Folks in the local Hokuriku countryside would have called his type “unsavory,” to put it lightly.

It was escapism, plain and simple. Belittling others, making someone else’s life worse than his—it all made it easy for him to forget the way things were.

He had a tattoo on his left shoulder—a cartoonish depiction of Devicer Three’s helmet. Nearly everyone in the Force looked up to the soldier of black and gold. They were proud of him, relied on him. He was their hero. And even men like Takeda had heroes.

The sun was far below the horizon, even when viewed from the top of the observation tower. 1900 hours. An older man stood where, unbeknownst to him, two fourteen-year-olds had that very morning.

“Devicer Three...” the former Defense Force colonel muttered. “Wearer of the Asura Frame. The centerpiece of our nation’s defense.” Even among the ruins of his country and military, he still made sure to wear his dress blues. “It’s been eight months now since we lost him.”

“And you’ve done a great job of keeping it a secret for so long,” Chloe Todo replied.

But her sarcasm was lost on the colonel. “Circumstances must. Believe me, we would have made a grand announcement of his death and lit a fire in the people if only we’d had a successor to take his place.”

“Over eight hundred candidates and the Mark III rejected every last one,” Chloe recounted matter-of-factly.

“And it’s thanks to that machine’s dithering that we’ve been pushed into this corner! We’re sitting ducks out here, Professor. Why in God’s name does an AI have that kind of power?! Why can’t it pick a Devicer?!”

“It’s not an AI,” she explained plainly for the umpteenth time. “It’s consciousness. The Asura Frame is a hybrid organism physically composed of ADAMAS nanomachines and artificial muscle fibers, coupled with a separate awareness linked to the liminal space between truth and falsehood. Under the right conditions, this organic nature is what allows such a high degree of adaptable functionality and…”

“Enough,” the man interrupted. “I won’t survive another lecture from you.”

For some people, no amount of modernization and no number of advancements in computer technology was enough to get them to learn. Some were just stuck in their ways and instead relied on family or coworkers to adapt for them. The colonel was one such person. Change, metaphorically at least, was a foreign concept to him.

Chloe gave up on the explanation. “Simply put, the Mark III was unsatisfied with its prior Devicer.”

“*Unsatisfied*?!” the colonel responded incredulously.

“Correct. Its last wearer was chosen for his image and patriotism, but he was unable to utilize the Frame to its fullest potential. This, ultimately, is probably why he was killed in action and why we nearly lost the Mark III with him.”

The professor glanced over at the clone elf resting peacefully within the sleeper pod beside them. It was likely that the Replicant had never truly accepted her Devicer.

“Perhaps it’s afraid to reawaken,” Chloe wondered. “The Asura Frame’s core strength lies in its ability to adapt to various situations, to improve itself in response to stimuli. If something is impeding that function, it stands to reason that the Frame would rid itself of the obstacle.”

“That Devicer was winning us the war!”

“I’m not so sure. Humans and elves created the twelve Asura Frames and spread them throughout the world specifically to defeat the archmages, but as far as I can tell, the Chosen Dharva still stand.”

The colonel went silent. The Dharva were the keepers of the portal-keeps, powerful sorcerers and fearsome fighters. Leaders of the anomalous threat and scourge of human civilization. They were all-powerful.

“My daughter had a funny idea recently that’s actually proving to be somewhat viable,” the professor said. “Tests will begin shortly. We’ll reawaken our shield soon enough.”

Aliya Todo was waiting in the Mark III Asura Frame’s underground hangar, impatiently checking her watch.

“Do you dunderheads have any idea how late it is?”

“Give us a break, they wouldn’t let us go all day,” Ijuin argued back.

Aliya liked to carry herself with grace in both mannerism and speech. However, that did not preclude her from insulting her friends, applying weird nicknames to them, and just being an overall joy to be around.

Her face went red. “I *told* you I could come and get you both! You don’t need my mom to remind those dolts that you have jobs to do! I can do that myself!”

“No.” Yu didn’t consider this up for debate. “Those guys are the last people any girl needs to interact with. You’d get it even worse than we do.”

“Stop treating me like a kid!” she growled. “You’re not my dad, you know!”

“Give it a rest. We can handle it. They can’t do anything we’re not already used to.”

Not even Chloe, essentially the camp’s second-in-command, was exempt from their lecherous gazes. And Aliya was a half-elf, which only made it worse for her. The blood of a beautiful race ran through her veins, and she looked the part. She was exceptionally seraphic, like an antique doll. The fact that her assisting with her mother’s research exempted her from daily chores was a very good thing.

“You do plenty as it is. I mean, what you showed us was pretty crazy,” Ijuin said, skillfully changing the subject. “No one’s been able to get the Frame to budge since its Devicer died, but you woke the thing right up!”

“Eight hundred candidates couldn’t even get the power on, much less armorize,” Yu added.

“Well, I was a little…hesitant about trying it at first. Frankly, I still can’t believe it worked,” Aliya admitted.

The three of them moved to a table where a photograph, some freshly picked flowers, and an urn rested. The picture was of the late Devicer Three, and the urn contained his ashes. The role of Devicer Three had been bestowed to the most charismatic and charming man in the Force, and the winning smile in the photo spoke to those qualifications.

“I’m sorry I called you pigheaded behind your back when you were alive!” Aliya quickly apologized. “You were a total creep, but I’m still sorry I said it!”

“You schmoozed the higher-ups, but really treated us like dirt,” Ijuin followed.

“But still, that doesn’t mean you deserve to be treated like this,” Yu concluded. “We just don’t have a choice if we want to wake up the Mark III. Please understand!”

Aliya gently reached into the urn and pulled out a small, white, satin pouch filled with the deceased man’s ashes. “We’ll bring this back! We promise!”

The trio regrouped around the Asura Frame, which had been lowered onto the floor. It totaled 195 centimeters long and 193 kilograms heavy. Aliya removed the weighty helmet and placed the last of Devicer Three inside, securing it with tape. Crude, but effective.

She placed the helmet back onto the body and raised her right hand out over the Frame. “Mark III, awaken! Superconductive turbine, activate!”

Much like during Ijuin’s trick at the observation tower that morning, a ring of light started to glow from Aliya’s palm. The undeniable mark of the nano-augmented.

The Mark III reacted to Aliya’s order and the small wheel embedded into the suit’s buckle started to spin. Just because it was small didn’t mean it was weak, though. This little generator produced more energy than an entire power plant, enough to fuel the wrath of one man-made asura.

“That’s one way to do it, I guess,” Ijuin mumbled. “Don’t got a Devicer? Just shove what’s left of the last one inside and make the Frame *think* there’s one! How did Professor Chloe explain it again? The seventh…something. Something to do with the foundations of the body and mind.”

“I think she meant there are like, pieces of the soul that get left behind after people die? Maybe?” Yu guessed.

“Manas, the seventh of the eight consciousnesses in the alayavijnana doctrine. It refers to the ego,” Aliya elucidated. “But turning it on is one thing. Eliciting enough power to get it to move efficiently in battle is another.”

Yu suddenly tilted his head. While Aliya was talking, he could hear a different voice. A woman’s. Horribly faint, but audible and captivatingly beautiful. It sang, as if reciting a poem,

Oh, Traveler. Heed me, oh Traveler,

Wanderer of the realm and distances vast,

Rejoice, oh Siddha. The awakening has begun.

An image of the elf girl in the pod flashed through his mind and the wheel in the Mark III began to pick up speed.

“D-Did you do that, Aliya?!” Yu exclaimed.

“No! But I’ll take it!” she shouted excitedly. “Let’s hurry and bring it outside. Yu, man the long-range controls. Ijuin, weapons. I’ll provide assistance and reconnaissance!”

The boys hastily threw the HMD goggles over their heads. They were slim and sleek, like what you might see in a game of airsoft, but came attached with a pair of over-ear headphones. The goggle portion covered the wearer’s entire field of vision with a Head Mounted Display.

Various stats and numbers blipped directly into view.

5

A humanoid figure took off from the summit of Mount Gorogatake. The Asura Frame flew through the night sky, cutting through the air like a knife through butter. Even as it twisted and turned, there was never even the slightest change in speed. Silently, effortlessly, the Mark III soared to the old coast of the sunken city in no time flat. The only sound it made came

from the supersonic jet streams that burst from the suit's full-body thrusters whenever it accelerated.

The ultimate weapon—equipped with a fifty caliber anti-materiel rifle from the hangar—had no wearer this time, and yet it danced as if a Devicer were piloting it. But behind the controls were only two young boys and a girl, operating it remotely.

"Now this is what I'm talking about!" Ijuin cheered. "Anti-gravity lifters are the way of the future! You could make an actual UFO with technology like that! Man, eat your heart out, NASA! The age of rockets is over!"

"Among the many treasures the migrant elves brought with them, those lifters are some of the most priceless!" Aliya boasted. "Elves lose their powers on Earth, but vaunted magical artifacts are a different story. Mom says gravity modifiers and microscale superconductive turbines, like the Prayer Wheel, are impossible to replicate in this world!"

"I'm convinced. It controls almost like a video game," Yu marveled.

"Like a shooter," Ijuin agreed.

"It has to be intentional, right?" Yu's HMD captured the Asura Frame's field of view in real time. "You can even switch into third-person mode." A screen to the side displayed the Frame's back and surroundings, allowing them to easily survey the environment.

The three of them held controllers that became the connection between their will and the Asura Frame's movements. Their right palms glowed as their respective nanomachines communicated directions to the Frame instantaneously. The controllers technically had touchscreen interfaces, but no one ever used them. It just felt weird *not* to have something physical to fiddle with.

"You needed a whole control room to do this just half a year ago," Ijuin reminisced.

"Technology's come a long way," Yu remarked next to him.

The trio couldn't see each other with the goggles on, but they could still feel the hard floor of the hangar beneath them. They all sat in a circle, like an after-school video game club.

"It's not technology that's advanced," Aliya corrected smartly. "It's the personnel. We've had these devices for ages, but no one had the right aptitude for nanomachines to make use of them. It's a good thing your fitness levels have increased lately."

"Dude, we're like, full-on control room operators now!" Ijuin exclaimed.

"Mom never liked that place. Too much machinery."

"I can't speak for Ijuin, but I don't think I'm anything special," Yu said.

"You're doing a great job with the controls," Aliya reassured him. "Way better than Ijuin or I could manage. Keep doing what you're doing."

Yu wondered for a moment if that might have had something to do with the amount of exercise the other two got, or lack thereof, then refocused on the job at hand.

With the homes, stores, and street lamps of Maizuru now extinguished, the only light came from the humble stars and crescent moon above. However, the darkness was no obstacle for the Frame's night vision. Yu blasted streams of air from the posterior thrusters and soared to his heart's content.

But this could only entertain him for so long. Eventually Yu spotted a patch of land that had escaped the flooding and went in for a landing. There, he identified a pack of over twenty wild dogs. They seemed to have turned a portion of the old, overgrown park into their territory. The pack growled and barked at the invader from the sky.

Yu lowered into a combat stance.

"W-We're shooting them?" Ijuin stammered.

"No. I have a different idea."

This wasn't like last night. He wasn't afraid. He primed all of the thrusters across the Mark III's body and activated them at full force. The cyclonic jet streams whipped the surrounding area into a maelstrom, the sudden change in pressure creating a massive shock wave. Any animals that couldn't hold their ground were blown away and never got back up. The blast of wind had shattered their bones. What remained of the pack fled with their tails between their legs.

"I really don't like having to do that to dogs," Yu sighed.

"If you didn't, someone else would've," Ijuin said. "We have to. They're too dangerous."

"That just reminded me," Aliya interjected. "Let's go to the mall in the east part of the city. Where the monkeys have moved into."

She transmitted the location data to Yu and a small map appeared in his vision. A single thought later, *Go*, and the Mark III sped off. The Frame zipped across ten kilometers of city, landing in the parking lot of a shopping mall in the eastern heart of Maizuru in just under ten seconds. It was barely even the equivalent of a stroll around the block for a unit capable of supersonic flight.

A few Japanese macaques with soft, baby-like faces quickly dispersed. Although they never showed trepidation around humans, the strange intruder from the sky was alien enough to frighten the wild monkeys.

"Too dangerous to scavenge the place by foot," Ijuin muttered. "As if there'd be anything left, considering there are over two hundred of those little guys all over the place. You can't really hunt that many with a few guns. Might be some canned food or other tools still lying around, though."

"Normally, we'd simply have to wait for the animals to run out of food and move on." Aliya's grin was practically audible as she spoke. "But with the Mark III, we can dethrone these animal despots! It's the biggest mall on this side of the city, just imagine how much we could— Wait."

"What's wrong?" Yu asked.

"Be on alert. I'm sensing a heat signature much larger than a regular monkey coming from inside the mall. No, two…"

“Ijuin, launch a star shell. The suit has some stocked, right?” asked Yu.

“Um, does it? Oh, there it is. Here.” Ijuin fired an illumination round from the Mark III’s left shoulder. It burst in the air, flooding the vast parking lot in light. “W-What the heck are those things?!”

The five-story mall lit up as if the sun had risen several hours early, and Yu watched in shock as over a dozen colossal figures crashed through the windows. They appeared humanoid, but were much larger than any Japanese macaque—more like gorillas than monkeys. Some had four arms extending from their torsos, others had six, like a band of asuras.

“Since when are there gorillas in Japan?!” Ijuin yelped.

“I’m detecting enchantment!” Aliya swiftly reported. “They’re probably macaques that have been altered by magic!”

Upon further inspection, they did indeed have the very same baby face.

“Magic?!” Ijuin parroted. “For real?”

“It’s likely that somewhere in the city, there’s an Anomaly that can alter a being’s shape, making them its thralls!”

“So what, it gave some monkeys a makeover and turned them into gorillas?!” Yu remembered the dog from yesterday, and it suddenly made sense. The eight-legged beast had most likely been transformed by the same sort of spell.

Without warning, one of the gorillafied macaques took a hard swing at the Mark III. Its fist slammed against the helmet with enough magically-enhanced force to dent solid metal. No doubt, this was no ordinary gorilla. But this was no ordinary metal either.

“Dang, that’s some hard stuff!” Ijuin hollered. “The Mark III doesn’t have a scratch!”

“It didn’t even budge,” Yu said, amazed. “It’s sturdy, that’s for sure.”

The gorilla seemed to have taken more damage than the Frame. It gripped its broken hand, bent a full ninety degrees in the wrong direction, while wailing and shrieking on the ground in pain. Yu visualized a kick in his mind, and the Mark III prepared to put the writhing beast out of its misery. Exactly as Yu had willed, the Mark III relaxed, then snapped its right leg like a whip, delivering a lightning fast instep kick without even a running start. The top of its armored foot collided with the massive creature and flung it towards the exterior wall of the mall faster than a speeding car. The gorilla crashed and fell to the ground, where it remained, unmoving.

“The Mark III’s power is insane,” Yu muttered in awe.

“I think we can take that warm welcome to mean they consider us intruders. Ijuin,” Aliya called, “let’s clean up this mess.”

“You got it!” he replied.

They were practically playing a co-op video game at this point. The trio’s HMD goggles listed seven “Gorilla Macaques.” After the Mark III’s surprising display of strength, though, the creatures weren’t so eager to attack anymore. According to the computer there were nine more on the

way, but before long, they and all the other “Gorilla Macaques” were nothing more than targets.

“Targeting calibrations complete. Fire!” Aliya cried.

“Hell yeah!” yelled Ijuin.

The Mark III held the fifteen kilogram anti-materiel rifle in one hand like it was nothing. On Ijuin’s order, it pulled the trigger. *Bang*! The Frame pointed the muzzle at its next target. *Bang*! Another. *Bang*! Massive 12.7mm bullets ripped the gorilla macaques to shreds, one by one, and the Mark III made the intense recoil from every shot seem like nothing. With every sonorous blast from the rifle, a gorilla became minced meat. Like a needle popping a balloon.

A minute was all it took.

“Nice!” Ijuin shouted triumphantly. “Maybe we can actually take a look around now.”

“I hope there’s still some food left. Maybe some rice?” Yu said. “They keep cutting our rations down.”

“I wouldn’t count on it. The rats’ve probably gotten to that, but I can’t blame you for hopin’. Ugh, I could go for a steaming bowl of some right about now!”

“Hold on. Something’s not right,” Aliya interrupted the boys’ celebration. “Magic detected! Someone’s cast a spell!” A bewildered silence followed before she identified the threat. “L-Look!”

Ijuin let out a frightened scream. “W-What’s going on?!”

They started to rise. The eviscerated corpses of the gorilla macaques lumbered back to their feet, heads missing, stomachs agape, and arms torn to pieces. And then, they began to lug their dangling guts and organs over to their nemesis—the Mark III. Those without legs clawed their way closer, dragging along whatever was left of their torsos.

Yu shrieked. “This is a nightmare!”

“I wholeheartedly agree!” Aliya concurred. “I’ve identified the spell! Animate Dead! It turns nearby corpses into zombies!”

“Take this!” Yu willed the Mark III to slug one of the gorilla macaques, now a gorilla zombie, with its free hand.

The Mark III’s fist landed squarely in the zombie’s face and launched its head clean off. But even without a head, it clung on to the Frame unfazed.

“It’s still moving!” Yu cried.

“I-It won’t let go! Crap, there’s another one! We’ve been bit!” Ijuin howled.

One gorilla zombie after another grappled with the Mark III, punching and gnawing at the armor. If this were some American TV show, this would’ve been the clincher with blood and guts flying everywhere. That is, if the Frame’s plating weren’t more than durable enough to handle the assault.

Yu envisioned new orders for the Mark III. “Let’s see what happens this time!”

The Frame ejected jet streams from its thrusters once more. The incredible gust of wind swept the zombies away on all sides, rending limbs from many of the once-dead corpses. But this only slowed the undead horde's attack. Undeterred, they began to trudge towards the Mark III all over again.

"Tenacious!" blurted Ijuin. "Yeah, those are zombies, all right! Whadda we do, Ichinose?!"

"I-I'll try to find some sort of anti-undead weapon! Buy us some time, Yu!" Aliya pleaded.

While his friends panicked around him, Yu found himself perplexed. "What the heck is this message?"

English text had appeared in the middle of his display.

[Need assistance?]

"I don't know what that means, but if you want to help, please do!" From what Yu could deduce, the foreign words seemed to be offering aid, but their sender was unknown.

Immediately after his reply, more English text began to fly across the bottom of the screen from right to left.

[Mantra Server Startup Complete. All PRAJNA running.]
[System Now Booting Spellbook "PRAJNA HEART SUTRA"...]
[Set Forth This Spell – Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha...]

"W-What's happening?! I'm not doing this!" Aliya sputtered. Regardless, the Mark III was changing. Particles of light started to pour out from the Frame's right hand. "Adaptive nanofactors?! What are they doing?! What is going on?!"

The mysterious particles, reminiscent of the very same machines that composed the Mark III, joined together and solidified into a single object. A long, thin, yellow piece of cloth that was strikingly evocative of something thoroughly mundane.

Yu blinked. "A scarf? What— Why— Whatever, there's no time!"

The mangled bodies of the gorilla zombies were clambering on the Mark III, trying to weigh it down. *Shake them off!* Yu ordered the Frame. In response, it whipped one of the creatures with the yellow scarf in its right hand. Hard. It struck with a surprising amount of weight, similar to a wet towel, and the moment it made contact, the zombie burst apart in a shower of blood, guts, and other visceral liquids.

"It turned that corpse into chunks!" Ijuin shouted.

"Th-That could be our anti-undead weapon!" Aliya stuttered. "How did you do that?!"

Yu, however, had regained some measure of composure. "So the scarf's a weapon, huh?"

Swing! he willed. The cloth promptly drove itself into another zombie and yet another deluge of gore followed. Again. *Wham*! And again. *Wham*!

Somehow, amid the carnage as corpse after corpse exploded, the scarf remained spotless, unmarred by even a single crimson stain.

It only took twenty seconds for the Mark III to wipe out the gorilla zombies. But there was no time to rest. Once the immediate threat was gone, the Frame entered surveillance mode and positional data blipped into the lower-right corner of Yu's display.

"On the roof?" Yu muttered. "There's an enemy up there?"

The wheel affixed into the buckle of the Mark III's belt—the superconductive turbine that powered the Asura Frame, referred to by Professor Chloe and Aliya as the Prayer Wheel—suddenly began to spin. Faster. Faster. When the turbine reached peak velocity, Yu commanded the Mark III to leap into the air. It shot up far above the top of the five-story mall, and there on the roof, he saw it. A fae, standing on the edge and observing the lot below.

It was stout, with arms long enough for its knuckles to scrape the ground and legs comically short in comparison. On its face was a stone mask, decorated with mysterious, alien designs. It carried a wooden staff and wore a horn tied to a string around its neck. Its clothes were made of animal pelts.

"It's an Anomaly!" cried Ijuin. "A fae from the other side, Ichinose!"

"Analyzing species," Aliya followed. "Got it! It's a sub-species of goblin—a bugbear! They can use magic!"

Yu, however, was focused on another message that had popped up in his view.

`[I recommend Excalibur Mode.]`

"In Japanese, please!" he pleaded.

Then, he heard a woman's voice flowing from the headphones on his HMD goggles. Captivatingly beautiful and in perfect Japanese.

"Unsheathe the queen's blade. By the Holy Shroud, it is now yours to wield."

"S-So I've got a sword. Okay. Got it."

"I shall sing the traveler's hymn. A song for the wanderers of the path, guided by the Perfect Wisdom of prajna to the far reaches of the realm—Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha..."

Yu was certain. It was the same voice he'd heard during the awakening experiment. Her song was strange, seemingly improvised like jazz music, and the lyrics made no sense. It was a gentle song, yet majestic. Divine.

"The Gospel Code?!" yelped Aliya. "Who's sending it?! Mom?!"

The scarf began to harden in the Mark III's hand, straightening out and condensing into something long and metallic. It had transformed into a sword.

Yu realized at last. "*That's* what you meant!"

The sword's handle was cylindrical and easy to hold, just like an actual hilt. The tip was tapered into a sharp point.

Yu roared, fighting spirit boiling inside him. He activated the posterior thrusters and jet streams rocketed the Mark III downward as fast as a whirlwind. Below, the bugbear waved its staff to cast a powerful lightning spell, but the electricity dissipated as soon as it struck the Asura Frame.

"Not even magic works against this thing! You got this, Ichinose!" Ijuin hollered.

Aliya could hardly contain her excitement either. "The anti-magic shell is doing its job well!"

By the time his friends' encouragement reached Yu's ears, the battle had already been decided. The whetted Holy Shroud pierced the enemy fae's gut, and its body dissipated in a cloud of hissing mist.

"Look at that! Such clean maneuvers, and from long-range too! And that weapon!" The colonel was beside himself. They had just finished witnessing the artificial awakening and remote operation test from the top of the old observation tower. "I didn't see the last Devicer use it all that much, but I'm impressed. It's a fine addition to the arsenal."

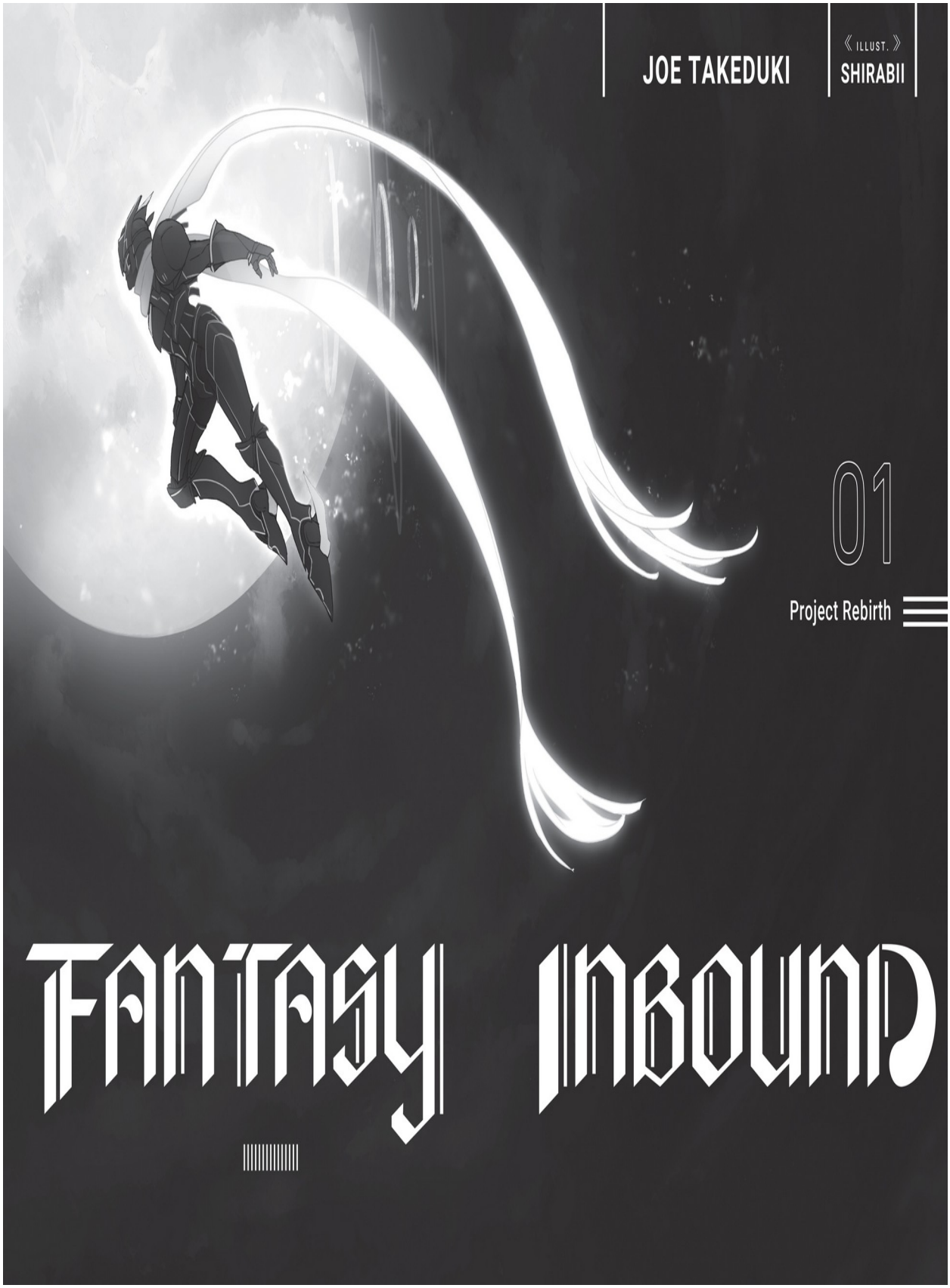
"The Holy Shroud can..." Professor Chloe remembered that what she was about to say would be lost on the man, but continued regardless. "It can only be bestowed in the name of the queen. It's rarely, if ever, given to someone unworthy of it. As I recall, the previous Devicer only had the honor twice."

"Oh?"

"At any rate, this means we can move to step two of the awakening experiments. Project Rebirth can proceed."

Long gone were the days of monitoring the Asura Frame's status from messy control rooms. A 3D stereographic projection on the desk reenacted every detail of the Mark III's movements, as well as its surrounding environment.

Chloe could feel a bud of hope burgeoning inside her. She glanced back at the pod, where the elf girl with midnight blue hair slept without a word or even so much as a twitch of the eye. Her lips were still now, but moments before, they had been moving, ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly, spilling tiny bubbles of air as she murmured whisperings to her new chosen one.


JOE TAKEDUKI
《 ILLUST. 》
SHIRABII
01
Project Rebirth
FANTASY INBOUND

Chapter 2: The Flying Castle's Reprisal

1

The next day, after the night with the monkeys, the sky was clear, and Yu Ichinose's breakfast that morning was a mouthful of grass and dirt.

"Takeda," he spat, both literally and figuratively. "Doesn't he ever get bored?"

About twenty minutes ago, Yu had been dragged into the shade behind one of the many inconspicuous buildings around camp. His mistake: letting Leading Private Takeda catch him out alone. The private claimed that the boy owed him the time Professor Chloe had so rudely interrupted yesterday. After many merciless whacks to the head and several sucker punches to the gut, Takeda concluded the beating by quieting Yu's pained groans with handfuls of grass that he shoved into the boy's mouth.

He never got back up. He simply laid there, tasting the earthy tang of dirt that never seemed to leave his mouth no matter how many times he spat. The look in Takeda's eyes, the sheer apathy and thoughtlessness, still terrified Yu to remember.

"He's been getting a lot less subtle lately."

It used to be more underhanded. He'd make them get naked in front of everyone, force them to eat weeds, burn them with a lighter. But these days, it didn't take much for him to get violent. It spoke to how far things had deteriorated. Physical abuse was simply part and parcel of everyday life.

The aching was starting to fade. Yu sat up and leaned against the building. He sighed.

"Looks like they got you worse than me."

Yu looked at his full-formed friend. "Ijuin. Well, had to make up for yesterday."

Ijuin rubbed his round gut. Apparently he'd gotten off easy—that is, easy enough for him to make his way all the way here by himself. A punch in the stomach or two.

He plopped down next to Yu. Together, they stared idly at the sky.

"This place seriously sucks."

"Hey, Ichinose. Remember that glasses guy from the other day? Military arrested him."

"What? Why?"

"He was sneaking in and stealing supplies from camp."

"I hope they let him off with just a beating." But compassion was in short supply lately. Yu imagined a black and blue corpse, but quickly stopped himself before it darkened his mood even more.

"We gotta make sure our escape plan doesn't get out. Play it safe."

"You said your family might be in Kyushu?" asked Yu.

“That’s what they said the last time I talked to ’em. And we’re in Kansai, so not *too* far from Fukuoka. I’d say that’s where we oughta be headed.”

“Sounds like a plan. I just wish we could take everyone with us. Everyone but the military guys, I mean.”

“I getcha,” Ijuin mumbled under his breath. “At least Aliya and Professor Chloe, y’know?”

The two heard a noise and quickly went quiet, praying they hadn’t been heard. Their hearts beat in their throats.

It was the young mother of the lost child they’d found.

“Hang in there,” she said, placing two cans of coffee in front of them, a precious delicacy. “And thank you.”

And then she left. She must have seen what Takeda had done to them.

Yu cracked the can open and took a sip. The cuts in his mouth stung, but the drink was sweet.

“I wish…” His eyes began to water. “I just wish I could help these people. I want to do what’s right.”

“I don’t know if it’ll help you with that,” Ijuin said, “but I do have some new info on that Replicant elf girl.”

An hour later, Yu was walking down the hallway of one of the research facilities alone. Professor Chloe had asked to see him that afternoon. He thought back to what Ijuin had told him.

“Get this. Last night, while we were doing the remote testing for the Mark III, I got into one of the research computers and took a peek at some confidential stuff.”

Yu remembered how his friend recounted the results of his hacking foray.

“…So a Replicant is basically what they call a ‘living access point.’”

“…They’re clones of elves who had some kinda telepathic ability or something, and they use that power to transmit special cloud data to the Asura Frame that unlocks its adaptive functionality. It’s usually something related to magic.”

“…Yeah, I don’t get it either. There were a ton of those complicated words and terms you know elf scientists use all the time, so a lot of it didn’t make sense to me.”

“…But if we can get Aliya and Professor Chloe on our side, we could take that Replicant girl and the Mark III and book it outta here! It’d be so easy. And we could protect people!”

Yu calmly stifled the excitement in his chest as he entered the office.

“Excuse me.”

Chloe’s office was on the third floor, although it would be more apt to call it a lab. She and her daughter lived in a larger room next door. The professor was standing next to the window.

“You wanted to see me?”

“Yu,” she said, “you accessed the Astral Library’s satellite data archive last night. Is that right?”

“Is it?”

The professor waved her hand and a stereoscopic image appeared above her desk. It replayed footage captured by a miniature drone of the Mark III transforming the Holy Shroud into a blade.

“I’ve seen the logs, but that’s redundant. The Holy Shroud simply cannot be unlocked without accessing the Astral Library.”

“It can’t?”

“No. It’s impossible. The last Devicer could only use the function twice in his entire career.”

“Um, okay?”

“What I want to know is what fancy trick you pulled to manage that during *remote operation*.”

Chloe stared straight into Yu’s eyes. He looked away awkwardly.

For a lab, the professor’s was surprisingly barren. Her spacious desk didn’t even have a mouse, only a thin monitor and keyboard. There were no documents, books, or references scattered across the floor, or anywhere for that matter. It was all digital. Everything could be instantaneously displayed with 2D or 3D holograms. In fact, the entire room was a motion-controlled computer. On the exterior, though, it was like a showroom, decorated with only the most fashionable furniture and tasteful decor. The dirty refugee camp had nothing on it.

The elegant room’s elegant owner exhaled. “I take it that means you’re clueless.”

“I’m sorry, it just kind of happened.”

“The queen…” Chloe muttered quietly to herself, “or the princess, I suppose I should say. Has she chosen him?”

“You mean the girl at the top of the observation tower?!” Yu blurted out.

“How do you know about her?”

“Uh, I…” He couldn’t help himself. “Sorry.”

The professor shrugged, unfazed. “Forget it, no need to explain. I think I can guess. Your nano-fitness levels have been climbing for a while now. It was only a matter of time before you got past security.”

“Aliya and Ijuin, maybe, but I’m nothing special.”

“The numbers say you’re right. But what if…” Her words trailed off. She produced a keycard from her lab coat pocket. “Here. Pay Her Highness a visit.”

“You’re just gonna let me?!”

“Yes. Allowing the two of you to meet may change something, and if that means I don’t need to protect her anymore then we’ll have no more reason to be here.” She flashed a devilish smirk. “What, you thought you were the only ones with a plan?”

Yu felt like he was walking on air. With both the professor and, by extension, Aliya on board with the escape plan, there was no reason left to hesitate. He arrived at the observation tower's entrance before long and inserted the card into the slot next to the door. It slid right open.

"Yes!"

The place was barren, just like the time he and Ijuin had snuck in. Yu made straight for the elevator, rode it to the top, and approached the sleeper pod without delay. The elf girl slumbered before him.

"What is she?" he asked no one. "What even *is* a 'Replicant?'"

"We are the keepers of the key of wisdom, the enlighteners of the child of man and elf—the Asura. Also, you look a bit lost. I believe I can help with that as well."

Yu recoiled with a start. He'd heard a girl's voice, clear as day. But how? He was the only one in the room. He looked at his right palm to see the ring of light glowing. Someone was communicating with him through the nano-augmented cells in his body. And that someone could be no one else.

Yu looked up at the pod. "Are you talking to me?"

"Indeed I am. I've been waiting for you—my fated one."

The girl in the pod at last opened her eyes. They were sharp, almost almond-shaped, and distinctly elvish. But it wasn't their beautiful, bright shade of blue that enchanted Yu. It was the power, the sheer spirit and passion that burned in them, unlike anything he'd seen before.

2

"Your fated one?" Yu echoed. "You're not talking about me, are you?"

"*But of course I am.*" Tiny bubbles formed within the blue liquid and rose from the elf girl's lips as they moved vaguely in the shape of words, but produced no physical sound. Yet somehow, a strong, dulcet voice resounded in Yu's ears. "*You are to be my future husband, and at last, destiny has brought us together once more. My affection for you has not waned since last we professed our eternal love in lives past.*"

"D-Did we really do that?"

"*It's certainly possible. What's important, though, is that you are my fated one. Of that I'm certain.*" She cracked a grin that almost seemed playful, but it wasn't snide like Takeda. This one was pleasant. Somehow, Yu didn't mind her jokes. "*Call me Ein.*"

"Okay, but, er," Yu stumbled over his words, "I hear some people call you 'Replicant'?"

"So it would seem. I am not of a natural existence, 'artificial,' one might say, created for a grander purpose, but that's of no importance right now. I would have your name." Ein's gaze didn't waver. "What do they call the one who is to share my destiny?"

"I'm, um, Yu Ichinose. But I don't know about all that destiny talk."

"You know, Yu. I am something of the living equivalent to the Perfect Wisdom known as prajna. It's not often that my intuition is wrong. You are

worthy to succeed my sworn companion—the ruler of the skies—the third Asura."

"Your sworn companion? You mean the Mark III?" Yu was getting used to the girl's esoteric and confusing way of speaking.

"The one and only," she affirmed. "Though, I must ask. Why do you not look at me?"

"Look *where*?!"

The girl called Ein was, put plainly, bare naked, and the liquid she floated in didn't leave much to the imagination. She looked about the same age as Yu, and her pronounced curves were hard for the young man to ignore. Her figure was smooth, shapely, and without a single stray hair to be seen, even all the way down to—

Yu stopped. He couldn't bring himself to ogle her so brazenly. At the same time, though, it was just as difficult to keep his eyes fixed to hers. Her fiery, dagger-like gaze seemed to overpower everything it came in contact with. It made Yu's heart race.

"Look at me, Yu. I want to give you my everything, now gaze upon it."

"*Phrasing*! What if someone takes that out of context?! Stop that!"

"I will do no such thing. What kind of fated one would I be if I wasn't prepared to surrender my body and soul to you? I assure you, I am not being dramatic."

Yu realized something strange as they bickered. He wasn't a particularly shy person, but not exactly sociable either, and yet, here he was hitting it off with a girl he'd only just met. Perhaps they simply clicked. Or perhaps more likely, Yu thought, Ein was just that charming. There was something about her. Her confidence, her charisma, her openness. She was positively magnetic.

Finally, Yu gave in and resolved to at least look her in the eye (and *only* the eye).

"Wait," Ein said abruptly. "Someone's coming. Hide, Yu. I will pretend to sleep."

"O-Okay!"

It didn't take long for Yu to find a decent enough place to conceal himself in the cluttered observation deck. Moments later, he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. Two middle-aged men—the colonel and his adjutant. They came up to the sleeper pod and observed the naked elf girl inside. Perhaps a little too shamelessly.

"I just don't understand." The balding adjutant sneered. "A Replicant, you called it? What purpose could an organic counterpart serve to the Asura Frame's onboard AI?"

The fifty-something-year-old assistant officer leered at Ein's body, making sure to get an eyeful of her comely chest and the unmentionables below. His smug grin was starting to tick Yu off.

"It's not our job to understand," his superior replied plainly. "The only thing that matters is that as long as it's with us, the elf woman has to

cooperate. And not just the Mark III. Professor Chloe is strangely fond of this clone."

"What's so special about a clone? Couldn't she make as many of them as she wants?"

"They can't simply be reproduced. Only a few of these exist in the world. These…living, elvish computers. It's complicated business."

"Shame. She's a pretty thing. She'd do wonders for morale." The adjutant chuckled derisively, his unrepentant cruelty more than evident in that singular cold gesture.

The colonel's stoic composure was just as reprehensible. "Keeping the men happy is important, but show some modesty. We can't have society deteriorating to the point of using minors for…" He thought for a moment. "Wait, this clone has elvish physiology. Isn't that right? Their kind live exceptionally long lives. I suppose we can't use her appearance to judge her age."

"She could very well be up there with Professor Chloe behind that face."

"I hear that woman's more than three centuries old. Freaks of nature, they are."

"She's definitely the oldest bag *I* know," his assistant cackled.

They were incorrigible. The entire conversation was utterly asinine. Yu felt his body seethe with emotion. He quickly realized that it was anger. He was furious, absolutely boiling with rage at the sheer, disgraceful audacity of the two men to think that it was okay for them to belittle others for their gender or race. Just because they were different.

Yu wondered what the wisest course of action would be. Obviously, it was to wait for the men to leave and figure out how to escape with Ein. But just then, his own words echoed in his mind.

"I just wish I could help these people. I want to do what's right."

Something stirred inside him. Was it right to stay silent? Would he be able to face himself if he didn't speak up and make his rage known, right this second?

Yu emerged from his hiding spot, marched right up to the men, and stepped between them and Ein's pod. He became her wall. He made his presence known. And he would not be ignored.

"What in the hell are you doing here?!" the adjutant roared.

"You're one of the junior laborers," muttered the colonel. He was still too cowardly to commit to calling them what they were: child soldiers.

Yu wasn't concerned about himself anymore. He wanted to scream at them, come what punishment may. To tell them how disgusted and fed up he was. But before he could—

"Something's coming, Yu! Use the Holy Shroud!"

Following Ein's warning came a fierce impact that shook the entire observation deck and sent chunks of reinforced concrete collapsing from the ceiling. Then, a torrent of blistering fire and a mighty explosion. Yu's

right hand glowed as particles of light began to spill out of it.

When Yu jolted awake, he found himself cradled within some kind of soft fabric—a strange, fluffy, yellow textile all around him.

"Where…" he groaned. "Where am I?"

"The Holy Shroud protected you. Very impressive, Yu."

"What? I didn't make it do that."

"Then all the more so. The Shroud appeared and shaped itself of its own will, just to come to your aid," Ein extolled. "You're all I thought you to be and more."

Yu searched for her, but could see nothing except for the yellow fabric still clinging to him.

"Why is it here, though? I thought it was part of the Mark III!"

"Because I granted it to you. I did not lend it. It's yours, and it will be with you until your final breath."

"This is getting weird," Yu sighed in confusion as the cushiony cloth began to unravel itself. The magic, scarf-shaped fabric had enlarged itself to enfold his entire body. Once returned to its original form, the Shroud vanished.

There was no time to sing its praises, though. Surrounding Yu was nothing short of a hellscape. The walls of the observation deck, the glass, the ceiling, nearly everything had been decimated in the blast. Flames smoldered and hunks of rubble were strewn all over the floor. They'd been attacked. Possibly bombed.

A strange smell lingered in the air. Something unnerving, yet familiar to Yu all the same. It was charred bone and human flesh. He noticed two incinerated corpses nearby. They were wearing dress blues, scorched black.

Yu's breath caught in his throat. The colonel and his adjutant were gone, just like that. But no bomb or missile could have reduced them to such a state.

"The Anomalies are back," he quavered.

The observation deck, free from its walls, boasted a greater view from Gorogatake's summit than ever before. Especially of the emerald aurora shimmering overhead. Its portal-keep, the colossal flying citadel that had been nothing more than a hazy mirage in the distance until now, loomed nearby atop a mountainous hunk of stone.

A dragon zipped by, skimming the tower by just a few meters. Red. Its bat-like wings dominated the sky. From snout to tail, it had to have been at least thirty meters long. The beast opened its maw and loosed a scorching storm of incandescent death at the ground below, the very same flames that had devastated the observation deck. Over the roar of the dragon's flamethrower, Yu heard a particularly husky shriek as an unfortunate victim met their end. He could only pray that it hadn't belonged to Ijuin.

"A nagaraja of crimson blood," he heard Ein relay in his mind. "Still young, though. Rather runty for a red dragon."

“Ein!” Yu cried, spinning around to her pod. Miraculously, it was in one piece. Several cracks marred the reinforced glass-like material, but Ein was unharmed. However, some of the liquid was leaking from the fractures, and just when it looked like it wouldn’t hold any longer—

The cracks in the material suddenly splintered and shattered into a magnificent fractal of shards. The curious liquid flooded out onto the floor, leaving only Ein inside, bare but safe.

“It is a strange day to finally join the world.” Ein leaped gracefully from the remnants of the pod, landing softly on a lone heap of rubble.

3

Yu found a box of singed military boots in one of the boxes that had survived the blast. He stuck them on Ein’s bare feet, then offered her his black button-up. Fortunately, it covered what it needed to.

The parts it *didn’t* necessarily need to cover, however, were the problem. The buttons struggled against her ample chest, and her radiant thighs were rather conspicuous, to put it one way.

“Still, you won’t look at me?” she questioned.

“Maybe when we get you some more clothes!” Yu spluttered back.

He maneuvered his way through the chunks of concrete, broken iron bars, and shattered glass up to the very edge of the ruined tower. One step away lay nothing but the void—thirty meters of open air between him and the ground. From there, he could see everything. The observation deck wasn't alone in this nightmare.

The dragon spewed its fire. The flying portal-keep and its imposing ramparts levitated not even a kilometer from where Yu stood. Dozens of troll soldiers were terrorizing the camp below.

"The refugee shelter's on fire!" he shouted in disbelief.

The former warehouse, the only safe haven for over a hundred unfortunate souls, was engulfed in flames. From the dragon surely, Yu thought, but then he saw the balls of fire soaring listlessly through the air. Fire elementals. They, too, were playing a part in the incineration. On the ground, the trolls continued their own barbaric march of destruction, swinging their giant axes and swords with wanton abandon, rending human combatants and civilians alike.

"Why?" Tears formed in Yu's eyes. "*Why*?! Why now?!" He screamed at the top of his lungs, "Ijuin! Aliya! Professor! Where are you?!"

They couldn't hear him. He knew that. But he called for them anyway.

"Are they your friends, Yu?" Ein stepped up next to him. "If so, then we should hurry. We need to descend and save them from this carnage! This tower could crumble at any moment!"

"Right!"

That word. "Save." Just how was a middle schooler supposed to save anyone? Yu wasn't a fighter, and he certainly couldn't come to anyone's rescue. Still, he ran. As fast as his adrenaline-charged legs would carry him. He flew down the stairs, skipping every other step, sprinted through the hallway, and leapt out the tower's entrance in record time. Surprisingly, Ein managed to keep pace with him every step of the way. Yu knew he was a fast runner—he was confident of that, in fact—but Ein could trot with all the grace and speed of a gazelle.

"Where might your friends be?" she inquired.

"Um..." Yu hesitated. "This way, I think!"

Enemies prowled Gorogatake's peak. Yu and Ein proceeded swiftly and carefully through the burning buildings and gored corpses strewn about. The dragon deliberately concentrated its attacks anywhere people started to gather. Yu tried not to think about all the people that were probably burning to death around them, or about how many had likely gathered at the blazing shelter for their lunchtime rations.

Yu suddenly stopped. "Oh my god."

"Despicable." Ein paused with him. "No mercy. Not even for children."

They had frozen in front of what could have only been the handiwork of a troll. A massive pile of corpses, and a single sakura tree, yet untouched by

the flames. A young boy hung from a branch by his collar. His eyes were lifeless, flesh dangling from his mangled stump of a leg.

“Why? What reason is there for this?!” Yu cried in incredulous anger.

“There is no reason,” Ein replied with a grimace of pure disgust. “The creatures you call ‘trolls’ ravage and consume what they please.”

The scene played out in Yu’s mind. A wandering troll, going about its heedless devastation, happens upon a boy who tempts the barbaric monster’s taste for human flesh. But a battlefield is no place for a meal. So what does it do? It nibbles off a leg for the road, then saves the rest on a convenient tree branch.

Yu finally recognized the boy. It was the lost six-year-old he and Ijuin had found.

His stomach churned. “I…”

Feeling uneasy on his feet, he looked down from the gruesome sight, where he found the other two. Cold. Gone. It was the young mother who’d given him the coffee earlier that day, cradling her younger son in her arms. They had no exterior wounds, so it had to have been some kind of magic. But whatever had killed them, their agonized expressions painted a picture of an exceptionally painful death.

“This is just…” Yu choked. He began to cry. “I can’t take this anymore. Was Tokyo not enough?”

That June. That hellish month last year, when the earthquakes came and the floods rushed in. When the rain fell without end, the rivers spilled over, and the wind tore through the streets. The coast, whipped by the salty ocean gales, had taken the worst of it. So many drowned, dragged to their death by elementals in the water. Not even puddles in the road were safe. The rain never stopped. Never.

No one knew exactly how many had died that month. Some said at least five million in the metropolitan area alone. Others estimated over *ten* million. Yu’s family was just another statistic.

“Yu!” Ein called. “Do you have a weapon? Ready the Holy Shroud, if not!”

Shocked back to his senses, Yu turned his gaze upwards. An axe-wielding troll wearing armor covered in soot and blood was approaching. The intimidating glower on its face and the pure evil in its eyes paralyzed Yu with a kind of affliction that no snarling wild dog could ever hope to elicit. Fear. Terror. Impending doom. And a twinge of anger. A rebellious sort of anger. Was this it? Was *this thing* going to be the end of it all?

Yu trembled. His legs could have given out at any second. And he glowered right back.

Pop!

Smoke rose from the barrel of a soldier’s Type 89. The soldier lay sprawled on the ground, one foot in the grave, only barely managing to point his gun at the enemy’s back. The troll collapsed on the spot. Its protection against firearms had run out just in time.

“Th-Thank you,” Yu stammered. “Wait!”

“Oh. It’s you. Waste of…a bullet.” Their savior, Leading Private Takeda, went limp.

The private had given Yu and Ijuin plenty of reason to plant a bullet in his back on more than one occasion, and the boys had often joked as much. But now, as the last of his strength faded, he was a silent husk. Along with the other corpses, his skin started to turn a necrotic black and blue.

“Poison. A magical toxin must be blowing in the wind. We should leave,” Ein suggested.

Yu nodded in agreement and the two took off. His tears continued to fall, but still he ran. He would not stop for anything this time.

He and Ein eventually came to Lab Four. It was only a matter of time before the blazing building completely collapsed, but that wasn’t their destination. Yu hurried to a hatch in the ground and frantically pried it open. They rushed down the metal ladder and sprinted down the corridor.

“Guys!” Yu shouted. “You’re all here!”

“Yu!” Aliya exclaimed.

Ijuin noticed him next. “Ichinose! Man, thank god you’re all right!”

They had arrived at the A-Type Exo-Frame Mark III’s underground hangar, where the man-made Asura was stored and occasionally underwent special testing and experiments. Yu had heard that it was the sturdiest place in the camp, aided by the fact that it was underground. This place, he was certain, would be the last to fall. It had to be the most likely shelter Aliya and Ijuin would escape to, and his hunch had been right.

The trio embraced each other, overjoyed that everyone was safe and sound. But then, Yu realized that he wasn’t quite as right about that as he had thought.

“Professor Chloe?”

“Yu… I see you’ve woken up our Sleeping Beauty. Thank you.” The professor was on the floor, leaning against a wall of the vast, empty testing space with her legs splayed out. Her lab coat was stained crimson.

A hideous gash extended diagonally from her left shoulder, all the way down to her waist. There was blood everywhere. Her face was sheet white and dark rings had started to form under her eyes, as if the shadow of death had already descended upon her. Ijuin hung his head, tears resting in the corners of his eyes, while Aliya clung to her mother’s side, painfully and repeatedly calling for her.

Ein approached the professor and knelt in front of her. “You served my source-mother in the homeland, didn’t you? I want to thank you for treating me well.”

“I only did what I had to, to make sure you were healthy and safe.” The professor smiled weakly. Her strength was gone. “So you’ve chosen Yu?”

“I have. I’ve already entrusted him with the sacred sarira. I can only hope that he chooses to wield it as I know he can.”

“I see… Yu.”

“Y-Yes?!” he stuttered.

“Through time and ages, across worlds and countless revolutions of the wheel of life, you found the princess.” Chloe spoke slowly and softly. She was normally so quick-witted and sharp when she prattled on about her theories, but now, each utterance seemed to require immense effort. “It cannot be a coincidence. Your meeting had a reason.”

Yu hung on every word. “A reason?”

“The threads of fate that brought you together were not woven serendipitously.” She stared deep into Yu’s eyes. “Please, never forget, Yu. Though the path before you may seem winding, bleak, and filled with naught but strife, she will walk it with you. All you need to do is choose the way you think is right.”

Yu met her gaze as his own words rushed back to him. *To do what was right.* “Professor, I…”

“I ask that you consider taking Her Majesty south. With Aliya, if you’re able. There’s a city of elves. A city on the water. Have you heard of it? You’ll find my brother there. He’ll—”

“Mommy!” Aliya cried, her voice cracking. Her mother could no longer hold her eyes open.

Chloe felt for her daughter and whispered as she stroked her cheek. “You do not carry the full blood of the Yakshia in your veins, my daughter. Your natural life will likely end long before our own. I was ready for that. I was prepared to be there when you took your last breath, but it seems our time together has been cut short.”

“No! You can’t go! We have to be together forever!”

“I’m sorry, little one, but it’s not to be. Death is a journey we all must take alone. We will meet again at the end of samsara, my beloved. My sweet Aliya. My lost…sapling of Yakshia…”

With those final words, fitting for an elvish sage, Professor Chloe went silent and never spoke again. Aliya sobbed quietly while distant explosions rattled the ceiling. The Anomalies were still in full force.

“Won’t they give us a break already?!” Ijuin bleated. “They’ve gotta run out of time soon!”

“W-We shouldn’t get our hopes up. They’ve been storing magic for three months behind the boundary,” Aliya reasoned shakily between sniffles and tears. “Mom… Mom said they won’t leave any time soon.”

Yu felt anger smoldering inside him. Aliya was one of the most dedicated and steadfast people he knew. She’d already lost her father, and now here she was, trying to pull herself together while crying over the body of her mother. She deserved time to grieve the loss of her parents, damn it. Yu thought she was entitled to her sadness, but Aliya was focused on facing the cold reality of their situation before all else. He fumed at his powerlessness. How could he be so utterly useless?

He locked eyes with Ein. The elf girl nodded. *I believe in you*, her gaze seemed to say.

Yu wasn’t powerless. He turned to the gold and matte-black suit of armor on the hangar wall.

Ijuin’s eyes lit up. “Oh, the remote operation! Good thinking, pal! We’ll send those things packing just like—”

“No,” said Yu. “The only reason things went so well that night is because Ein was helping us. Remote operation can probably only do so much. Someone needs to wear it.”

“E-Ein?” Ijuin repeated, confused. “You mean that girl?”

Yu finally understood what Ein had been telling him all this time. Rather, the truth was he always had. He’d simply been denying it. Him? Impossible. Over eight hundred rejections and *he* was the one? He couldn’t bring himself to believe it. But now, if he was the *only* one, then maybe…

“So I just put it on, yeah?” he asked.

“Not quite, Yu,” Ein replied firmly. “To choose this path is to become one with the child of man and elf. To share your destiny with the Asura.”

Yu heeded her warning and made his decision: To hell with it all. No regrets. If he was going to do this, he was going all in.

The next moment, the Asura Frame on the wall dissolved into particles of light—adaptive nanofactors. The resplendent dust converged on Yu, and then—the gallant clatter of metal as jet black armor plated itself over his right hand. It belonged to the Asura Frame. The armorization had begun.

“Yu…” Aliya gasped.

Ijuin was flabbergasted. “Ichinose?!”

The Frame continued to equip itself onto Yu as parts materialized up his right arm and onto his left, clanking and locking together one after another. The process continued at his feet, up his legs, around his waist, along his chest and back, until, lastly, the helmet snapped shut around his head. When the metallic chorus was over, an ebony aegis covered every inch of Yu's slim figure.

To complete the transformation, the yellow, scarf-like cloth that Ein called the Holy Shroud appeared all on its own and wrapped itself around Yu's neck, with the ends dangling over his shoulders. One might really have mistaken it for a scarf at first glance, but it was clearly more than that. The two ends billowed behind the Mark III, never touching the ground, like living appendages. Or perhaps like a pair of long, thin wings.

4

Although the underground hangar was yet safe from the flames, the world above was ablaze. Through the furnace emerged Yu, piercing the inferno and soaring high above. He and the Mark III shot from the ejection port like a missile.

"The portal's close," Yu muttered. "I can't believe I'm really flying." And without a plane, no less.

Upon reaching the same height as the portal-keep, he stopped ascending and hovered in place. Altitude: 472 meters. Distance from the enemy stronghold: approximately 1.9 kilometers. The towering fortress's status was designated as "Materialized" in English. All of this information, complete with various other numbers and accompanying strings of text, was at Yu's fingertips, projected directly into his field of vision. He could see perfectly—the full 360 degrees—as if the helmet and visor weren't even there. Anything he laid his eyes on, intel could be projected directly onto. From altitude, wind direction, and velocity to his own heart rate and body temperature—the incredible amount of information would have overwhelmed normal people, but Yu's nanomachines seemed to allow him to make sense of it all.

And he wasn't alone.

"I will interpret the Asura's will. You need only focus on the battle."

"Ein!" Her voice had reached Yu's ears via his body's nanofactors. "You're augmented?"

"Indeed I am. I have inherited the Warrior Queen's wit, and with it I will aid you. Lean on me."

"I'm going to help too!" Aliya sniffled.

"I'm here too!" Ijuin chimed in enthusiastically. "Dunno what good I'll be, but I've got your back!"

"Your presence alone is enough, human friend. It's by the hearts of those we fight for that a warrior is made more than a mere soldier," Ein said. "Understand, Yu?"

“Y-Yeah! Let’s just do this!” Yu wasn’t alone. That knowledge gave him the strength to spur himself on.

The ends of the Holy Shroud around his neck spread like wings, and Yu realized something as he rapidly descended. Bathed in the afternoon sun, the matte-black finish of the Mark III glistened with a golden radiance. A solemn and magnificent brilliance that Yu had never seen before dwelled within the Frame. It was also much more slender than he remembered—shorter and lighter, compared to its last wearer—but by no means weaker. He could sense a power as keen as the sleek edge of a katana slumbering within the black and gold suit.

Yu and the perfectly adapted Mark III landed and quickly encountered three trolls. He fired at them with the 12.7mm heavy machine gun he’d taken from the hangar. A weapon of this size was normally fired from a turret, but Yu shot it straight from the hip. However, several hundred rounds later, not a single bullet had reached its target.

“Yu! It’s Projectile Protection!” Aliya reported.

“Not even *this* works?!”

“Yu. Use your hands,” Ein said.

She provided no further hints, but it was plenty. Yu remembered what Ijuin had said: “Don’t think. Feel.” So this was what he’d meant. Yu could get behind that. He discarded the machine gun just as one of the giant, impatient trolls was swiftly bringing its warhammer down on the Mark III’s head. The gruesome lump of iron looked to be devastatingly heavy.

But Yu knew he didn’t need to bother dodging.

Otherworldly metal collided with the nanomachines, ringing out in a glorious knell. The Mark III didn’t so much as flinch. Yu couldn’t even feel the impact.

And then he used his hands.

Yu held his palm up against the attacking troll’s armor. It emitted a shrill, mechanical hiss, before the Anomaly crumbled to the ground. The high-frequency waves of the Frame’s ultrasonic oscillator had blended the enemy’s guts, its brain—the very tissue of its every organ from the outside in. It only took a fraction of a second. The troll’s armor may have defended against plenty of blades on the other side, but it was useless against this attack.

“Watch out!” Ijuin shouted. “Behind you!”

“Believe in the Shroud,” Ein beseeched. “It protects you.”

“Yeah. I know.” As another troll brandished its greatsword behind him, Yu’s mind was clear. Soothed by the cloth around his neck.

The Shroud’s yellow appendages fluttered at his back. One stretched out and wrapped itself around the sword, halting its arc towards Yu, while the other struck the troll’s head, instantly breaking its neck.

“*Just...*” Aliya choked, still flooded with grief for her mother. “*Just one more!*”

Moments later, the axe-wielding troll sprinted towards him and prepared to attack, but the Mark III was quicker.

"Enough!"

Brimming with anger for his half-elf friend and the burning desire to get her away from the violence as soon as possible, Yu and the Mark III whirled behind the enemy lightning fast and delivered a meteoric strike—a volley kick. With the steady coordination and form of hitting an airborne soccer ball straight into the opponent's goal, Yu's armored leg made contact, shattering the defenseless fae's lower spine. His body felt strangely light and reacted with an unfamiliar acuity.

Yu stared at the incapacitated foe beneath him. "My body just moved on its own. It's fighting like it knows how! What is this?"

"Yu," Ein called, "your melding did not begin when you joined today. You have been absorbing the Asura's mind for much longer, learning the ways of battle and how to fight as one."

"Like how I can mess with nanotech!" Ijuin said.

"The awakening experiments were gradually synchronizing Yu's nanomachines with the Asura Frame," Aliya surmised.

The enemies weren't finished. A square window appeared in Yu's view, displaying a great many heat signatures heading straight for the Mark III. About seventy in total. All trolls.

"Several Mind Talk spells detected!" Aliya frantically reported. "Your position's been given away, Yu!"

Yu had a feeling that even against such overwhelming numbers, he could come out on top easily. But the sooner the fighting ended the better. He glanced at the sky and a new window promptly projected a close-up of the flying fortress. The most dangerous threat of all was still soaring through those clouds.

Seemingly sensing Yu's apprehension, Ein's voice returned. "If time is of the essence, I can unlock the Astral Library's Doomsday Book Gospel and upload it to your Asura."

"What?" Yu said, utterly puzzled. "I don't know what any of that means!"

"Ichinose, Gospels are special words that open up advanced functions!" Ijuin explained.

"Correct. We elves have lost our magical powers here on Earth. However, we never lost our knowledge of the arcane," Ein continued. "Through the appropriation, transmutation, and parsing of your world's incantations and invocations, a grimoire was designed for the Asura. It is called the Gospel Code."

"A...grimoire? This thing can use magic?!"

"Yes. The prana born of the Asura's dharmachakra serves not only as a source of anical energy, but as a spring of miracles and enigma. I need only speak the Gospel."

"*Essentially, you can use a kind of faux-magic to artificially create phenomena!*" Aliya clarified for the stumped middle schooler. Fixed to the

center of the Mark III's waist was a wheel—the Prayer Wheel—a superconductive generator capable of outputting tremendous amounts of energy. Somehow Yu knew that this was the "dharmachakra" Ein spoke of. "*The observation tower was initially adapted to transmit the Gospel Code in order to intercept Anomalies invading from Primorsky Krai in Russia.*"

"*Oh! Yeah! The antenna!*" Ijuin's enthusiasm was not lost over the commlink.

This Book, or so Ein had called it, seemed to be their best option, but then gruesome images of the aftermath flashed through Yu's mind. A barren battlefield, extinguished of all life and even the flames themselves. The troll army would certainly perish, but so would everything else.

"No! No doomsday anything!" Yu hastily rejected, fearful of the magnitude of such a weapon. "There could be other survivors!"

"True," said Ein. "Yes, a very good point, Yu!"

"*Any other suggestions, Ein?*" Aliya asked in a fluster.

"This leaves us with one option," she replied. "We must open Pandemonium's door. Let's begin, Yu. Take to your throne above the clouds!"

"On it!"

Yu activated the jet stream thrusters and took off. Majestically, he soared high into the sky as familiar English text began to scroll across another screen that had popped into his vision.

```
[Mantra Server Startup Complete. All PRAJNA running.]
[System Now Booting Spellbook "VAJRA-SEKHARA SUTRA"...]
```

Ein had begun to unlock the Frame's potential.

Back on the ground, Aliya and the others had emerged from the hangar. It was only a matter of time before the flames reached the bunker, so they exited through one of its many entrances and took position somewhere relatively safe. The unearthly, emerald aurora rippled in the sky, lest they forget that their lives were currently in the hands of the floating castle.

"Nope, can't see Ichinose anywhere," Ijuin said.

Aliya nodded. "It's a good thing we brought the HMDs." Her heart ached as she donned the goggles and thought back to her mother, who they'd left behind.

Aliya's nano-augmented abilities manifested in the form of perception. Her nanomachines possessed functions that could identify magic in her presence, and more recently this had evolved to include species of Anomalies as well. For all her senses, though, the super-powered suit tearing through the air evaded her sight.

The Head Mounted Display projected the Mark III from directly behind—in third-person. Aliya got a clear view of Yu mid-flight, before switching her goggles off and turning her gaze to their third companion. The girl's name was supposedly Ein, and she was an elf. Just like her mother. Dressed in

nothing but a black button-up and military boots, she simply stood there, staring up into the void.

“Can you see him?” Aliya asked hesitantly.

“No,” she replied. “But I can sense him in my heart. One day, you may learn to do the same.”

She closed her eyes and began to softly recite,

—Five elements resonate.
—Ten realms speak.
—Six senses comprise the words.

Ein sang that verse as a harp would a melody. Aliya had heard it before. It was a favorite among the sages, including her mother. The universe was made of earth, water, fire, air, and the void. Each possessed a voice, a vibration, thus giving form to language, for which the six senses become the basis of words within the ten realms of life—or so the meaning went. Supposedly, this famous passage captured the essence of how the elves viewed the universe and the place of language within it, but to Aliya, who only knew life in Japan, it merely struck her as esoteric philosophy.

It evidently had been a password of some kind, because the instant Ein spoke the final word, communication was established. English words scrolled across the bottom of her HMD goggles.

```
[Mantra Server Startup Complete. All PRAJNA running.]
[System Now Booting Spellbook “VAJRA-SEKHARA SUTRA”...]
```

Ein was using her nanofactors to access the Astral Library aboard the artificial satellite in geostationary orbit above the Earth’s equator. She then proceeded to speak the heaven-sent scripture known as the Gospel Code.

5

Yu and the Mark III hovered ninety-eight meters above the ground. Directly below him were the seventy-something trolls, each of their positions distinctly marked by the system with a bright red dot.

Ein’s voice reached his ears.

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.
—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.
—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

“There! That must be the Gospel Code!” he exclaimed.

Powdery grains of light fell away from the Mark III—adaptive nanofactors. Every single speck was one of the countless ADAMAS nanomachines that composed the Asura Frame. True to their adaptive nature, the microscopic machines could join together to create a variety of shapes and forms, from unmoving armor to indestructible yet flexible

rubber, or even textiles and fabric. Each unit was a computer, power source, *and* an energy tank all at once.

"Nanomachines that can transform into anything," Ijuin marveled. "Almost like magic."

"But in reality, their ability to instantiate—or to 'cultivate,' rather, is thanks to a magic-adjacent, created by elvish wisdom and innovation," Aliya added in quiet awe.

The innumerable particles of protean, microstructing light coalesced into metal rings with a diameter of a little less than half a meter, tapered into serrated, razor-sharp edges. Their numbers were staggering. A data screen counted "7,042 Droids." The myriad of rings floated around Yu, maintaining flight with the Asura Frame's anti-gravity lifters.

A display designated the weapon: "MUV Chakram."

"Yu, those are the Mark III's auxiliary droids!" Aliya said.

"For real?!" Ijuin shouted excitedly. "Those are a part of the fifty thousand?!"

"Why do you think their codename is Pandemonium? The palace of demons is a fitting title for the little devils!"

"Yu, beseech the Asura," said Ein. "Release the swarm by its name."

"Its name? The Mark III has a name?" Yu asked.

"Take to heart and remember well the true name of my sworn companion, the King of the Storm. Hearken unto Rudra!"

"Rudra! Got it! Let's do it, Rudra!"

At once, the thousands of rings hissed through the air, spinning as they cascaded towards the targets below. The ensuing massacre was instantaneous and decisive. Seventy trolls. Seven thousand rings. At about a hundred blades per enemy, the droids eviscerated them absolutely, the nanomachines slicing through their armor like paper. Their Projectile Protection spells were useless against the sheer numbers. Had there been more to fight, the droids would have surely sought them out on their own, but with the all-too-short bloodbath at an end, they simply returned to Yu, disassembled into base nanofactors, and reformed with the Mark III.

The battlefield was stained with what remained of the trolls. Torn skin and exposed viscera, cracked skulls and ruptured eyes, shreds of gray and white matter, mangled organs and blood vessels. Yu saw it all. A window in his view depicted everything in vivid detail from up close.

How easily he had incited a slaughter. *Too* easily. Yu's stomach started to cramp in fear of what he'd done. It felt as if a rock was weighing down on his gut, and he had to fight the urge to heave.

And that was when it came. A deluge of hellfire engulfed the Mark III.

"I-It's the dragon!" Ijuin cried. "Ichinose, are you okay?!"

"The anti-magic shell is perfectly functional!" Aliya assured. "Stay calm, Yu!"

"I'm trying my best here, but it's *really* hot!"

The dragon continued to scorch the Mark III in midair. Yu sweltered inside the ADAMAS armor as his skin burned. Scanners indicated a temperature of 306°C outside the suit and a boiling 72°C inside.

"A dragon's flames are just a kind of magic," Aliya stated. "They can melt the armor off an aircraft carrier's deck. You're lucky the anti-magic shell is shielding you from the worst of it!"

"So in other words, you're saying it's holding back the part of the heat that's all magic-boosted," Ijuin said.

Yu moaned. "That's great, but I don't know how much longer I'll last!"

Fear crept up Yu's spine, when suddenly, a vicious force gripped the Mark III from its chest and back simultaneously. The pressure clamping it on both sides increased and the Asura Frame creaked under the growing strain. Everything quickly went dark. Yu could only assume that it was because of the intense force on the helmet, but that was *all* he could assume. He was being crushed by an overbearing weight, that much was certain, but he could have been caught in a hydraulic press for all he knew.

It hurt. It felt like his body would pop at any moment.

"What's happening?!" he groaned.

"*See for yourself.*" Ein's voice was accompanied with a digital window. It displayed a scout droid activation message, before revealing footage—likely being captured by one of the Pandemonium droids—of the red dragon, crunching and gnawing on the Mark III.

Yu remembered seeing the skeleton of a Tyrannosaurus rex one time, its massive maw that could have easily swallowed an adult human whole. In comparison, the red dragon was at least twice that size. And it was between the mighty jaws and ferocious fangs of such a fearsome beast that the Mark III found itself imprisoned.

"Guess it didn't like that I wasn't turning to ash," Yu said. "This is bad."

"Bad?" Ein echoed calmly. "Nonsense. This is our chance."

Yu gasped. She'd given him an idea. He knew just how to turn these lemons into lemonade. A screen listing various types of weapons appeared in response to Yu's stroke of genius: ultrasonic oscillators, high frequency vibroblades, electromagnetic contractors, among many others. He focused his gaze on a single one and selected it.

He took a breath, then turned all his rage, all his sadness for Professor Chloe and the people who had lost their lives into the greatest roar he could muster. He couldn't save them, but he could at least avenge them.

Full power.

Yu squeezed every ounce of energy that the Asura Frame could churn out and jettisoned air from every thruster on its body. Then, he turned. He began to twirl his body around like a top inside the dragon's mouth, picking up speed fast. The dragon, for all its raw might, was powerless to contain him. The wing-like ends of the Holy Shroud around his neck spun like propellers, and when Yu reinforced the makeshift rotor with a high

frequency current, they became vibrating blades. The Shroud blended the beast's flesh.

The dragon roared in unmistakable pain. Spitting out the Mark III, the two plummeted to the ground, but, Yu's vision having returned, they both regained their balance midair before making a dramatic landing. Neither took their eyes off their opponent for a second.

The Mark III stared the Anomaly down, and it stared right back. A thirty-meter dragon versus the puny, armored soldier. Yu was outmatched, as far as size was concerned. His foe was the mountain, and he was the pebble.

"Didn't the last Devicer use, like, extra gear sometimes that made him look like a Mobile Suit?!" Yu asked in a panic.

"Th-That's right," Aliya said. "The auxiliary droids would attach themselves to his arms and legs. Pandemonium series droids."

"The Full-Armor form! Man, the figure was super popular!" gushed Ijuin.

"I could kind of use it right about now. That dragon's pretty big."

"Is that what you think?" said a third voice.

"Ein?"

"I, for one, think it's horribly naive to mindlessly assume that larger weaponry is the only way to handle differences in scale," Ein declared. "Er, rather, I don't mean to speak ill of the dead, but that man's skill as a warrior really is debatable."

Yu kept to timid silence.

Ein collected herself. "*You know the ways of dragonslaying already. There's no need to falter now.*" There was hope in her words. Expectation. She was excited to see what her new partner could *really* do.

The dragon produced a low, rumbling growl, flames licking between its fangs, ready to be unleashed at any moment. With its pointed teeth and powerful jaws, the monster wasn't lacking for intimidating methods of attack. Its body alone was large enough to be a threat to anyone unfortunate enough to find themselves beneath its paws. A single swipe of its tail could launch the Asura Frame as well.

"I get it. I've already done it once before."

There was one simple way to avoid the invincible reach of colossal opponents: get so close that it couldn't use its size to its advantage. Yu grabbed the edge of the Holy Shroud and tore off a piece of the yellow cloth. The scrap grew, expanded, and swelled vertically. Excalibur Mode. The Shroud transformed into the very same blade as the one he had beheld that first night.

Yu activated the jet stream thrusters, wailing as he thrust himself directly into the enemy. The dragon met his approach with a stream of fire, but it was no match for the Holy Saber. Yu pierced the fiery sea in twain, dove for the beast, and planted the sword in its neck. It let loose a great howl of agonizing pain, rattling the Mark III. Pushing the Frame to its absolute limit, Yu drove the sword deeper, deeper, and deeper still, until his hands gripping the hilt nearly came in contact with the dragon's scales. But

even still, he didn't relent. He'd bring the whole of the Mark III straight through its throat.

The Prayer Wheel in the Frame's belt whirred at immense speeds. Then, power surged. Strength swelled inside the Mark III where Yu thought there was none left. "What is this? What's going on?"

He couldn't believe his ears. The whir of the Prayer Wheel had turned to chanting. Voices of both men and women.

"Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!" they chorused. "Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!"

It was the same odd lyrics that he'd heard Ein sing before.

"You're doing it, Yu!" the elf girl cried. "The Asura is answering your spirit! Your prana is climbing!"

A pale light enveloped the Mark III. The suit crackled and sparked with lightning, searing the dragon's body and its open wound as Yu pressed himself into the monster, burnishing the black and gold armor in radiant effulgence.

The dragon screeched in pain as it collapsed to the ground, though it hadn't yet been felled. It continued to flail and wallow in its torment as it attempted to free itself of the torture by throwing the Frame off. Yu held fast and clung close to his blade.

Until, at last, the otherworldly reptile went still. With the dragon slayed, a messy corpse splayed on the earth, the Mark III ceased emitting electricity and returned to normal.

"It's..." Yu panted. "It's over."

He heaved a heavy sigh. He felt no glory or valor as he lay next to his foe's corpse. The adrenaline faded and a wave of exhaustion washed over him, followed by the uncontrollable trembling of the aftershock of battle.

The helmet, still steamy from the flamethrower earlier, was starting to feel claustrophobic, and the moment that thought crossed Yu's mind, the wind brushed his face.

"This thing can do anything, can't it?"

The black and gold suit acquiesced to his wishes and de-armorized into sparkling nanofactors that assimilated back into his body. Free of the stifling armor, he basked in the refreshing bliss. He took several deep breaths. Once calmed, Yu attempted to stand, but stumbled on his feet. Moments before toppling from the dizziness, someone caught him in their arms.

"Ein?"

"You fought well. You *survived* well," she said. "This was your first battle, and yet you carried the day. I'm proud of you, Yu."

"What?" he muttered in the Replicant girl's embrace. "Isn't this what you wanted from me?"

"I would have commended you for *half* of what you accomplished here, in truth."

Ein held Yu tight, cradling his head close. Right into her ample chest. The soothing, gentle warmth eased his mind, until he realized just where that warmth was coming from. He tried to push away, but Ein's grip was ironclad.

"Let me go!" Yu stammered.

"No. I want to hold you."

"That was one crazy debut!" Ijuin cheered. "Way to go, Ichinose!"

"Agreed. You deserve recognition for defeating a dragon all by yourself. I'm sure…" Aliya choked up. "I'm sure mom would have given it to you."

Friends stood around him. Too fatigued to put his emotions into words, Yu settled on a frail smile in place of a reply.

If only the fight were over.

Yu stepped away from Ein's comforting presence and looked upwards. The wayward flying portal-keep wasn't going anywhere, and the emerald aurora continued to boast its enchanting elegance. They were in a stalemate, but that stoppage time had to be made up somewhere. In the coming round, whichever side ended up on offense and which on defense, this was no time to rest.

"Guess we've still got a bit further to go." The nano-armor replated over Yu's body as he eyed the skyward castle.

A digital window opened and streamed zoomed-in footage of the fortress. On one of the castle walls stood a young man. A fae? His countenance was dashing, to be sure, and his rippling, blue robe gave the impression of a mage, along with the wooden staff he wielded. A turban adorned his head.

He locked eyes with Yu. Was he observing him? Suddenly, the man in the footage smiled, and without averting his gaze, his mouth started to move. It couldn't be.

"Is he casting?" Yu asked. "Did he use a spell?!"

"Yu, I— This magic is off the charts!" sputtered Aliya. "I've just detected the Death spell! We're all in danger!"

Yu acted without a second thought. He tore the Holy Shroud from his neck and at once the scarf-like appendage enlarged itself to the size of a blanket.

"Get underneath!" he cried.

His Frame-less friends huddled together and squatted down while Yu threw the Shroud over them.

"Please! Protect them!" he pleaded, and the Shroud gave off a faint glow in response.

Meanwhile, Death had already begun to fall from the sky. Glistening snowflakes twinkled in the air, blanketing all of Gorogatake's peak. A single crystal carried with it enough damnation to consign one to the grave. Several of them came to rest on top of the Mark III and the Holy Shroud.

Ijuin gagged. "God, I'm gonna be sick! This is like, a hundred times worse than car sickness!"

"I feel like I'm about to spit up my insides," Aliya moaned.

“Rest easy, friends!” said Ein, as calm as ever. “Had the spell taken us, we would have fallen into eternal slumber long before feeling queasy. We’re safe, Yu!”

Thanks to the anti-magic shell, he, too, was protected.

“We don’t have to keep taking this anymore.” They’d been walked over for years, but now it was different. Now, they could fight back. Spotting a hunk of concrete reinforced with steel, Yu held his palm out towards it and activated one of the Asura Frame’s long-range armaments, pulling it into his hand. “No idea if this’ll do anything, but no harm in trying.”

An electromagnetic railgun. With enough electric charge to create a magnetic field, just about anything could be a bullet. The Mark III fired the concrete chunk at over Mach 8, and it instantly reached its target 126 meters in the air. Just before hitting the mage, he waved his staff, and it exploded. The man smirked.

Yu saw the man on his screen mouth something. He could hear no sound, but the subtitles on-screen made his heart skip a beat.

“Soldier of Earth, you fight with grace. I honor you,” they read. Even interpretation wasn’t beyond the Asura Frame’s abilities.

The aurora above Maizuru vanished, and the phantom castle’s status changed from “Materialized” to “Aerial.” Together with the man on its ramparts, the portal-keep disappeared, a mirage in the desert.

The battle was over. But Yu’s work wasn’t done. He sprinted off, still fully armored. His companions were safe, but the devastation caused by the dragon and the trolls was widespread. And then there was the death magic.

“No,” he gasped. “He made it so far…”

He found the body of an elderly man. Unburned and untouched, aside from the snowy crystals resting on his corpse. He’d escaped the bloodshed, only to fall at the very end.

The air reeked of burning flesh. Mangled corpses and bloodstains dotted the mountaintop in every direction. Yu trudged through the atrocities while the scars of war were still fresh, sniffling inside the Asura Frame. He wouldn’t stop until his friends finally came looking for him some time later.

EXPLICATIONS

| THE PANDEMONIUM SERIES AUXILIARY DROIDS |

Ijuin: Talk about next-gen! High-tech nanomachine drones made just for the Asura Frames!

Aliya: Compared to the Marks IV and V, the Mark III in particular has the most variety in terms of the kinds of droids it has at its disposal.

Yu: Why is that?

Ein: Because your Mark III, Rudra, is the King of the Storm.

Aliya: In other words, it’s the commander of the droids’ air division. The Mark IV, Mitra, is the King of the Land, and the Mark V, Varuna, is the King of the Sea.

| THE TWELVE ASURA FRAMES |

Ijuin: So basically, the Mark IV commands the ground, and the Mark V commands the ocean. Then what’s the Mark VI’s deal?

Aliya: I...don’t remember, actually. It was definitely something unique.

Ijuin: I heard the reason we don’t get much merch on the other Asura Frames has somethin’ to do with trademarks, or branding, or whatever. The Mark IV and V are in Korea and China, and I think VI is...Russia? The fact that I’m such a nerd for this stuff and even *I* don’t know is a crime!

Aliya: Yeah, because there’s nothing weird at all about commodifying a weapon of mass destruction.

Yu: Now that you mention it, it’s not much of a military secret anymore, huh?

Ijuin: Hey, the US did it with the Mark I and II! Their Frames had figures and models and toys... All sorts of stuff! They had this classic giant robot vibe going on.

Aliya: The Mark I does look like they pulled it straight out of Gundam, doesn’t it? The Mark II went a little more compact, though, so that one reminds me more of Dunbine.

Yu: Hey, does that mean they’re stronger than the Mark III?!

Ein: (Smugly) Please, those were only stepping stones for Rudra and beyond. The Mark III has nothing to compensate for!

Ijuin: Well, if they pack the same punch, smaller’s definitely better.

Aliya: The greatest struggle of Asura Frame research was how to consolidate the same amount of power into something human-sized.

Yu: I wonder what the other Asura Frames are like.

Chapter 3: Journey’s Beginning

1

Three days after the destruction of the camp.

Yu had taken Ein into the city early that morning to collect some feminine necessities. Namely in the way of clothing.

“One must be fit for a journey!” Ein said proudly. “I full expect your cooperation today, Yu.”

“Personally, I think you look fine in what you have now,” he confessed.

“Yu, really now? These fatigues? Even their *name* bores me. This top does not complement this bottom. Simply too much green. I require a more becoming outfit.”

“I never took you for the type to care about something so normal.” Unlike foodstuffs, clothes were in ample supply. Ein carefully eyed the interior of a store while Yu lingered behind. “You’re always so, well, gallant.”

“That does not preclude me from having taste, Yu. I am very discerning when it comes to clothing.”

“Noted.”

“And with weaponry as well,” she added. “Speaking of which, I’d like to visit an armory or a smithy next to procure a sword and bow.”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen. Best you’ll get is a knife and a gun.”

Yu genuinely thought that Ein had looked perfectly fine. Even in drab military garb, the Replicant girl, with her midnight blue hair and striking elegance, was absolutely radiant. Though Ein disagreed.

Free from her “uncouth rags,” Ein adorned her new outfit with pride. She wore a white sweater top, dark gray leggings stuffed into sturdy combat boots, and a black cap on her head that did little to conceal her pointed ears. Especially considering how much longer than Aliya’s they were. Her heritage was clear at a glance, if her stunning attractiveness and, above all, her powerful eyes weren’t enough to make her stand out. And Yu was lucky enough to be walking around town with her.

The Gorogatake camp was in ashes. Yu Ichinose and his three friends were the only survivors.

The days following the disaster had been busy with scavenging the few unburned buildings and digging through ashes for anything usable. They also conducted funerals for the dead. Most of the bodies they found had been charred from flesh to bone, but the four did what they could to afford whatever remains they found, flesh or not, their last rites. Try as they might, though, there were simply too many.

Along with all their other problems was the question of how to deal with the dragon’s corpse. Despite being engulfed by its own flames, nearly half of its body still remained, and if left alone would have attracted bugs and

diseases. They'd even discussed using the Mark III to dispose of it, but ended up not needing to bother.

"I've seen it a million times, but still," Yu muttered pensively as they made their way back from the clothing store. "They just fade away. All the people, all the monsters. Anyone who dies around a portal-keep."

Yu remembered sighing yesterday morning, the weight in his chest as he agonized over the heaps of the lost that might not receive a proper funeral, when that very night, both the corpses and his worries vanished with the wind. The skeletons of the incinerated had disintegrated into ash and ridden the breeze far away. Flesh had all but decayed to bone in the span of half a day, then crumbled into dust, and returned to the soil.

It was only today that they found the time to go clothes shopping. Ein strolled next to Yu, clad in the spoils of their venture. "When the spectral fortresses appear, the land starves," she said. "The earth, the water, and even the air. They feed on the dead, yearning to restore the energy and mana that left it."

"Professor Chloe mentioned something like that too."

"She, too, is likely with the waves and gales now."

Chloe Todo had not received a traditional burial. They had placed her on a boat and set her body out to sea, as was elvish tradition, according to Ein.

His thoughts with the late professor, Yu and Ein soon returned to the wooden inn that they were staying at. Far from the ashes of the old camp.

"Ichinose and Lady Ein have returned!" Ijuin announced.

"It's time to decide our destination!" Aliya said. "Team huddle!"

They were waiting in front of the inn. Yu and Ein regrouped and the four sat down on the pavement to begin the meeting.

"My vote's for following the coast to Fukuoka," Ijuin said. "Last I heard from my family, that's where they said they'd be, with what's left of the government."

"I say we cross the mountains and head for Osaka," Aliya resolutely challenged her elder. "The floating city of elves mom mentioned is in Wakayama Bay. We can find a boat to sail there from the city, and even if we can't, the Mark III can connect to satellite communications once we clear away from the portals."

The half-elf girl was putting up a good front, considering the fact she had lost her mother just a few arduous days earlier, but it wasn't flawless. Yu could see the cracks showing in her mask, and he tried not to add to her pain with needless pity. Sometimes a smile was what you needed to overcome tragedy, even if it had to be faked.

Yu and Ijuin were in surprisingly good spirits as well. As horrifying as the events just three days prior had been, the boys were not strangers to death and combat. Ten months of life after the Evacuation had toughened their nerves. For better or worse.

"That's where Professor Chloe's brother is, isn't it?" Yu asked.

“Right,” Aliya confirmed. “The settlement is called Nayuta, and it was built by sages entirely on the water. My uncle Nadal is one of the founders. And I think there’s a good chance he’s still alive! He’s not just smart, but a total conniving fox too.”

“Nadal?” said Ein. “Nadal Rafthul T’ashsakharington?”

Aliya leaned towards her fellow elf. “You know him?! Yeah, Nadal Rafthul, um, something. I could never remember his full name, but that’s him!”

“The original me… My source-mother seems to have known him.” Ein shut her eyes. “As I slept, I dreamed. Of this world. Of disaster. Of battle. Memories from my past life are dulled, and I can’t recall faces I once knew. When I heard that name, though, I felt the fluttering of a recollection. It spoke to me. ‘That man never changes,’ it said.”

“Wow, that definitely sounds like you’ve met him,” Aliya said.

“I’m certain we’ve met in a time past. I take it he must have left a strong impression for this to come back to me.”

“Well if Lady Ein says so, he must be an interesting guy,” said Ijuin. He’d taken to prefixing Ein’s name with ‘Lady’ at some point. He stifled his curiosity. “But I still say we shoot for Fukuoka. I wanna see what the government’s doing, and I wanna make sure my folks’re safe. We can go to that floating settlement later, yeah?”

Ijuin still had a chance to see his family again. Yu, more than likely, did not. When he realized this, he felt strongly for his best friend. He wanted to have Ijuin’s back. After all, what was the rush? They could visit this city of elves whenever.

“I will follow Yu wherever he goes,” Ein cut in, “but there’s something that I’d like Ijuin to investigate for me.”

“Me?” he questioned. “What?”

“I want you to examine the state of Yu and his Asura. You should be up to the task.”

“Oh, you want me to do some poking around like when I mess with nanotech!”

While Aliya’s nanomachine abilities had awakened in the form of magic and Anomaly detection, and Yu’s as the power of Devicer Three, Ijuin’s took the shape of gadget manipulation.

Ijuin extended his right hand with a playful, “C’mere,” and Yu raised up his own. They touched and began to exchange information through the interfaces in their palms. Ijuin hummed in thought. “The Mark III took some damage in the fight, but it’s already fixed itself up. Good as new. They aren’t kidding when they say the Asura Frame’s basically a living organism.” He relaxed his eyes shut. “I think Professor Chloe called it a ‘cross between man and machine’ one time. Thing probably won’t need any regular maintenance, that’s for sure. Crazy stuff. It packs a punch for somethin’ so small.”

“Yes, Asuras pack more than a ‘punch,’ but how is Yu?” Ein pressed.

Ijuin frowned in concentration. After a moment of silence, he opened his eyes and said, “I take it back. We should head to Nayuta first.”

“What?” Yu blurted. “You’re sure?”

“I think it’s for the best,” his best friend affirmed. “You’re a new Devicer and there’s no telling what changes that means for your body. We gotta get somewhere with experts, where there’s elves.”

“You’re kind of scaring me now!”

“Well, I mean just in case, y’know? Also, I wouldn’t stay armorized for long periods of time. I got this weird feeling while I was digging around.”

“What does *that* mean?!” Yu sputtered.

“I saw, like, an image,” said Ijuin. “A bad one. Like gears that don’t really fit together. You’ll probably be fine in ten, twenty-minute bursts, but if you keep it up for hours at a time, we might, uh, have some trouble. Anyway, that’s why we gotta get you to the experts!”

What his pal’s warning lacked in specificity, it made up for in the foreboding stress that now plagued Yu’s mind.

Their destination was decided. A military jeep that had avoided the destruction was stuffed full with everyone’s luggage and ready to go. They’d managed to scrounge up enough gas to fill its tank, but nothing more. Hopefully they would find more on the road if need be. Yu and Ijuin had changed out of their stuffy uniforms, the latter replacing his for a pink hoodie while Yu wore a white, long-sleeved shirt beneath a khaki military jacket. The youngest of the bunch, Aliya, maintained her trademark outfit and beret.

“No one’s around to get on your back anymore. You sure you want to keep wearing that?” Yu asked.

“It’s surprisingly well made and durable,” Aliya replied. “And very breathable as well. I prefer to prioritize function over form.”

Yu turned to the oldest member of the team. “Do you know how to use a gun, Ein?”

“More or less,” she said. “I’m more comfortable with bows, but can make do. I’ve already fired a few practice shots, actually.” The Replicant girl flashed a handsome grin, grasping the Type 89 hanging from her shoulder by a nylon string. “I quite like it.”

She seemed to be in such good cheer to at last have a weapon in hand that it looked like she might break into merry humming at any moment. They had equipped themselves with enough weaponry for everyone, but their greatest defense was undoubtedly the Mark III and its Replicant.

“You’re really positive about this?” said Yu as Ein glowed with joy. “You don’t need to hang around with us. Now that you’re out of that weird pod, you’re free. You can go wherever you want.”

“Unfortunately, no such place exists for me,” she answered coolly. “All I have are hazy memories of a past life and an incomplete collection of knowledge spanning two separate worlds. That, and a sense of duty to aid

the Asura's master. I'm ignorant as a child in my present state." She put her hand to her chest. "I would entrust myself with you. If I may."

"I mean, of course, but I'd hardly call you a child. You seem like the most mature one here."

"Hm, bold of you to assume I can't be exceedingly petty."

"You *did* get pretty pouty about the clothes," Yu ceded. "Anyway, amnesia notwithstanding, we can at least say you're the clone of an elvish queen and work from there."

"Wait, when did you hear that?" Aliya accused. "Ein, I didn't know you were a queen! Why don't I know that? You need to fill me in on these things!"

"I told no one," Ein said, unfazed by the younger girl's flustering. "Yu is simply that sharp-witted. He must have deduced it himself from the words I shared with your mother. Your shrewdness continues to astound me."

Yu blushed awkwardly at her pride-filled smile. "It's not that big of a deal. Anyone could've put it together."

Ein was certainly skilled at positive reinforcement. She never seemed to miss an opportunity to sing Yu's praises.

"In any case, I'm glad we're going to the settlement first," said Aliya with a hint of relief. "Rightful ownership of the Mark III is a little messy right now, so it would be safest for us to return it to the Elvish Foundation for now."

"Huh?" Yu raised his voice slightly in surprise. "I thought the Mark III belonged to Japan's Defense Force!"

The half-elf shook her head. "Devicer Three does. The Frame does not."

"Right, yeah. It's not like Japan's the only one who's got one, after all," Ijuin murmured. "There are Frames in China, and Russia, Korea... Now that she mentions it, it wouldn't make much sense for it to be Japan's sole property."

Yu thought back to the propaganda commercials that used to play on TV—the ones that constantly appealed for new recruits or the purchase of wartime bonds. The Mark III had been all over them. They must have colored his perception.

"So it's like..." Yu pulled his thoughts together, "on loan. Like how athletes get contracted."

"Something to that effect," Aliya said. "The Asura Frame is considered a national treasure of the elvish people. Think of how the paintings of Renoir or da Vinci are lent out to different places for a limited time."

The bureaucratic logistics of the Mark III were evidently more complicated than Yu had thought, but their meeting with the architects was at hand. This was the beginning of their journey.

2

Ijuin drove while Yu took the front seat next to him. The girls were packed into the back. They traveled from the city of Maizuru on the coast of

the Sea of Japan south through Kyoto prefecture. Houses and urban stores flanked the expressway for much of the first several minutes of their trip, infant ghost towns abandoned only a few short months ago. The occasional stray car, macaque, or deer stood out in the otherwise barren scenery, but no people. Never any people.

The further they drove, the scarcer buildings became and the closer the mountains in the distance grew. The road began to curve up and around the hills, snaking through the peaks. But the rough terrain quickly proved to be problematic.

"Well, that didn't last long," Ijuin spat. "Freakin' landslides!"

"We haven't even been on the road twenty minutes," Yu groaned.

The face of a mountain, fallen away from its body, was blocking the entire road.

Ein poked out from the back seat, grinning. "Your time has come, Yu. Show us what you can do."

Aliya popped up with her. "You know, the Mark III could take off with this whole car and *still* break the sound barrier!" she provoked.

Yu shrugged and pulled himself out of the jeep. The moment the desire to use the Frame entered his thoughts, the nanofactors spilled out and armorized in an instant. The peanut gallery back in the jeep witnessed the transformation of Devicer Three in all his black and gold-accented glory.

"Wonderful," said Ein. "You've tamed the mighty Asura well."

"Still," Ijuin said with dissatisfaction, "it's a bit plain, don'tcha think?"

"The casualness feels almost tryhard, so to speak," Aliya agreed. "It doesn't quite sit right. Although, a special phrase or pose would definitely be taking it too far."

"WHICH ONE OF US IS DOING THE PHYSICAL LABOR HERE?!" Yu snapped back, his voice suddenly amplified through speakers in the suit. His words echoed across the mountain pass, before slowly dying into an awkward, shocked silence.

With *almost* perfect timing, the Mark III displayed a window to Yu.

"Oh. I can adjust the volume," he said. "There's a voice changer too. Why would I need that?"

"Yu, let's send out an auxiliary droid with a camera," Aliya suggested. "So we can see how the road looks beyond here."

"Not a bad idea," Ijuin said. "Not bad at all. Should be able to control it remotely as long as it's in commlink range."

Yu tilted his head quizzically. "I could always just fly around myself."

"No, this is a good opportunity to test the Asura's abilities," Ein said. She made a good point.

A mechanical noise came from behind Yu as the aerial surveillance droid ejected itself from his back—a MUV Bumblebee. It was about the size of a carpenter bee and had the appearance of one too, with the exception of its unmoving wings and soundless flight. A simple drone that didn't even technically need nanofactors to function.

“It’s live,” Yu said, footage from fifty meters up streaming directly to him.

National Route 27 cut through Maizuru and its surrounding mountains, and it was littered with rubble from landslides and fallen trees. Not good.

Yu activated the anti-gravity lifters and hovered less than half a meter above the ground. “We need to get over this one first or we’re not going anywhere,” he said. “Hey, it might be easier if I just picked the whole jeep up and flew us straight to Osaka.”

“No, it’s too dangerous,” Aliya quickly responded. “The last Devicer had a similar idea during a search and rescue mission. With a bus full of survivors. It...did not end well. Let’s just say the military covered that little accident up.”

“They said a plane crashed because of a malfunction, yeah?” Ijuin added. “It was a huge scandal!”

“Got it. I’ll keep to the road and shuttle you one at a time,” said Yu.

He knelt down and lifted the jeep first. He hoisted the vehicle up and ferried it over the obstructive mound of earth with little effort, then returned to carry his companions one by one.

“W-We’re flying! In the air!” Ijuin hollered. “I don’t even have a seat belt on!”

“Do *not* drop me!” Aliya squealed when it was her turn. “If you drop me, we are *not* friends anymore!”

Ein came next, and out of all of them, her cheers were the most joyous. “I love the sky,” she uttered, her arms wrapped firmly around the Mark III’s neck—Yu’s neck—with a smile of pure glee. “It reminds me of a memory. Of a time I once rode on the back of a dragon.”

She rested in Yu’s arms like a princess held by her knight, but this heroine was twice as brave as her champion.

“Nothing scares you, does it?” said Yu.

“Not true,” she replied. “It’s better you learn now that alcohol and I are not on good terms. Do not ever ask me to drink, Yu. I will cry.”

“You’re kind of making me curious now.”

The voyage screeched to a crawl. Piles of earth, collapsed trees, utility poles, and toppled buildings impeded their progress at every turn, and each time Yu would need to meticulously fly them across. By the time they reached the neighboring city of Ayabe, it was already two in the afternoon. The streets, as deserted as all the roads before it, were lined with convenience stores and Shinkin credit unions.

But something wasn’t right. Dozens of cars were gridlocked in front of the buildings.

Ijuin stepped on the brakes and shouted, “What happened here?!”

The cars weren’t just stopped. Most of them had been completely totaled. Sedans were plowed into stores, kei cars wrapped around street signs, mini trucks slammed against older accidents, only adding to a chain of wrecks.

“I’m going to check it out. Everyone stay here,” Yu said.

“R-Right,” Ijuin stammered. “Get somewhere safe if anything dangerous pops up.”

“No. We ought to go as well,” Ein stated. “*Something* must have caused such unmitigated destruction of so many vehicles.”

Aliya shuddered. Her voice wavered. “Do you think it’s an Anomaly, Ein?”

“I don’t know,” she responded, swinging open the backseat door. “We won’t until we investigate further.”

The other three followed her lead and scurried out of the car with her. The Replicant girl readied her Type 89 with practiced hands.

“Looks like you know what you’re doing way better than us, Lady Ein,” said Ijuin.

“I do like to think I’m a rather skilled warrior,” she boasted. “War is war, regardless of the weapon of choice.” As was befitting of her royal genealogy, Ein commanded an imposing presence. So much so that it had elicited respect and admiration from Ijuin.

The four approached one of the massive pile-ups of ruined cars. Yu shuddered and moaned uncomfortably at the human bones scattered about the asphalt. He didn’t want to know how many had died here.

“They were probably refugees looking for shelter.” Aliya put her hands together and closed her eyes solemnly. “May they rest in peace.” A moment of silence later, she cocked her head. “Hold on, if the bodies had decayed naturally, wouldn’t the skeletons all be in one piece?”

“You’re right. These are all over the place though,” Yu said.

“Yeesh, look at the huge hole in that skull,” Ijuin moaned. “And all these other broken bones. Someone smash ’em?”

“Perhaps,” said Ein, “some*thing* was hungry.”

Her words rang with unsettling possibility. Upon closer inspection, many of the wrecked vehicles were stained with blood, both inside and out. Yu did not hesitate to armorize. The Mark III detected two heat signatures.

Headed right for them.

Yu transmitted the enemies’ locations via commlink and called out, “Everyone split up!”

Ijuin plodded, Aliya pattered, and Ein nimbly trotted away. The enemy descended from the sky seconds later.

“What is that?!” Yu cried. “A chicken?! A lizard?!”

“Anomaly identified!” came Aliya’s transmission. “It’s a cockatrice!”

The monstrous beast clumsily thrashed its wings as it alighted on the quiet streets of Kyoto. It measured about five meters long, maybe less, and almost resembled a dragon, but with the head, wings, and plumage of a chicken and the lower body of a lizard. The second avian-reptile chimera joined its partner.

They screeched in unison and fixed Yu with fierce, predatorial gazes. He assumed a defensive posture. He could do this. The Mark III hadn't faltered even in the face of a dragon.

Pop!

A gunshot rang across the street. At its source stood Ein, aiming her Type 89, her form flawless. The bullet hit its mark and blood spurted from the first cockatrice's neck, though it only managed to make the massive beast flinch.

Yu hurled himself into high-speed flight towards the cockatrice. "Then we'll have to hit it harder!"

He placed his palm against the Anomaly's feather-covered chest and activated the ultrasonic oscillator, emulsifying the monster's insides before it could even attack. A horrific shriek erupted from its beak, and the strange creature fell.

Just one more. Yu was feeling confident. But not for long.

"What?!"

Three video playbacks popped into the Mark III's view, along with a warning message. In one, Ijuin was coughing painfully. In another, the frail Aliya was doubled over and hacking in much the same way. Ein was running towards her in the final feed, grimacing as she covered her mouth.

Meanwhile, the remaining cockatrice had not moved to attack any of them. The chimera was flapping its wings, beak wide open in some sort of animalistic display of intimidation.

And then, it dawned on Yu. His mind flashed back to the camp days ago. "That's it!"

The jet stream thrusters came online and whipped up a whirlwind, with the Mark III at the eye of the storm. Yu did not stop. The squall churned the air, gusts and gales raging, and continuing to rage.

A new window alerted Yu that it had detected poison in the atmosphere.

"I've got it," he said. "It should all be blown away by now."

"Yu! Well done!" Ein's ecstatic voice came. "You perceived the threat before the Asura could!"

"You told me about poison in the wind the first day we met. I just thought a strong breeze might help," Yu said unassumingly. "I'm protected by the Mark III, but you guys aren't. I need to make sure you're safe."

"We did find ourselves in a similar predicament before, didn't we? All the same, such decisiveness..." Yet more windows revealed themselves to Yu. Ein's eyes were full of admiration. In the others, Ijuin and Aliya still looked pained, but not in life-threatening danger. "That must be it. Your keen mind. It's one of the things I saw in you. What the Asura saw in you."

"Well, we've still got one left, so can't let our guard down yet!"

Yu focused on the last cockatrice as its beak continued to gape. There could be no other explanation. It was exhaling poison from within its own body. The toxin in the air was what had caused all the cars to lose control. All the beast would have to do was watch for prey, expel its toxic gas, and

the driver would suffer a painful death before careening into some obstacle or another. Just like that, it had a free meal.

The cockatrice suddenly let out a shrill squawk. Its eyes emitted an ominous glow, and an explosion detonated directly on top of the Mark III. The black and gold ADAMAS armor was unscathed, but the blast repeated, over and over, in the exact same location.

"The... The cockatrice is releasing invisible beams of light from its eyes!" Aliya wheezed between coughs. "Anything it comes in contact with combusts!"

"Thanks, Aliya. I'll see what I can do," Yu said. It was a wicked power, to be sure, but nothing the Frame's anti-magic shell couldn't withstand. The real danger was to the people around him.

"Let's do this, Mark III," he muttered with quiet resolve.

Yu sped towards the enemy at thirty meters a second and met it face-to-face. Detonations shook the air behind him as he pounced and drove his knee into the cockatrice's head. Metal gouging through feathers and flesh, he actuated the ultrasonic oscillator, turning the attack into a scythe of encephalic death. The cockatrice's brain became mush and it collapsed, defeated.

"I should've known better than to get cocky," Yu scolded himself.

He landed from his hover and glanced behind him. Yu did not like what he saw. The creature's stray explosions had claimed their jeep in the chaos of his reckless charge. Only a smoking heap of wreckage remained of their beloved car.

Their wheels were no more.

3

Yu and his friends were stranded in the streets of Ayabe, but thankfully not for long. There was no shortage of nearby vehicles to choose from, and some were still in good condition. Like the small van they found, which was conveniently left with the key still in the ignition. Even more miraculous, it had a functioning battery and engine. They siphoned gasoline from the surrounding cars to fill the van's tank up, and even stored some extra in an empty gas can they'd happened upon. Though this was where their good fortune ended.

"We're not replacing the stuff we had in the jeep anytime soon, are we?" Aliya said despondently.

"All our crackers, and cup ramen, and canned food... Poof," Ijuin grumbled.

The equipment they had taken with them—the HMD goggles and weapons—had survived, but their food and miscellaneous necessities were toast.

Yu hung his head and sighed, "I'm sorry, guys. I should've been more careful."

“No, you were right to prioritize defeating the enemy,” Aliya consoled him. “Frankly, you deserve a standing ovation for taking out not one, but *two* threat level B+ Anomalies in only your second fight.”

“What she said,” Ijuin added. “We can always find more grub!” The young boy certainly wasn’t lacking for appetite, and yet the months of scraps he’d endured scarcely dampened his enthusiasm. “Osaka can wait for now! It’s time to set up camp and cook up some dinner! Whaddya say?”

Ayabe was located in an area colloquially known as “upper Kyoto”, where the local mountain range dominated the scenery. The Yura River that ran through the city was ripe with sweetfish. It was a city of beautiful views, but without the people to enjoy them. Even in better times, its population had been less than half of Maizuru’s, and few houses or shops polluted the landscape.

For Yu and the others, it came as an oasis in a vast desert. It didn’t take much exploring in their new van to happen upon treasure troves of supplies.

“No way!” Ijuin shouted. “Look at all this food! And it’s totally unopened!”

“Canned food, retort pouches,” Aliya listed off, “juice, instant coffee, mineral water... There’s so much!”

“I don’t know how long it’s been since I last saw ramen packets that some rat hadn’t gnawed through,” said Yu.

“Dude, rice! Dried pasta!” Ijuin cheered. “Even *flour*?!”

The city’s residents were long gone by now, but the things they’d left behind brought Yu and the others great respite. Every dilapidated convenience store or supermarket they broke into was a joyous occasion.

For all except Ein.

“You all must have been awfully hungry,” she said coolly. “I must admit, though, I haven’t the foggiest clue what any of these products are.”

“Anything in particular you want?” Yu asked. “I know you’re not big on alcohol, but what kinds of snacks do you like?”

“Yu,” Ein began, her eyes fixed and voice stark. “I have but one heartfelt request. Save me the sweets.”

The barren cityscape was much like Maizuru in some ways—no electricity, no running water, no gas—but so unlike it in others. Maizuru was picked dry, while here, something had preserved the town’s food stores far more reliably than a simple lack of looters could explain.

“Forget mice, I haven’t seen a single dog or monkey since we got here,” Aliya commented, glancing around from inside the van. The occasional flit of a building punctuated vistas of expansive nature along the country road. They were a long way from the suffocating flurry of urban sprawl. “There probably aren’t even any bears. Now, I’m glad for that, since we have all this food now, but why?”

“Because of the creature Yu slew. The one you call a cockatrice,” Ein replied. “It’s common for beasts near its nest to gradually disappear. Some are hunted out, others are eradicated by its toxins.”

“Makes sense that they wouldn’t wanna stick around where the predators are,” Ijuin said.

“Though the cockatrice is an exceptionally poor flier, so they tend to have little interest in beasts of the sky,” said Ein. “Or perhaps they feel a kinship with their feathered brethren.”

Yu recalled seeing plenty of starlings, crows, and bulbuls, now that she mentioned it.

When the sun was low, the four stopped the car and set out in search of edible flora. In particular, a certain weed whose favorite time of year just so happened to be the end of March: dandelions. Surprisingly, its leaves and flowers weren’t that bad when cooked right. They might have even found some mustard greens or wormwood if they looked hard enough.

“Remember that time we found those plants in Maizuru? That was the best,” Yu reminisced. Oddly enough for a boy his age, he never did like junk food all that much, and he missed fresh vegetables dearly.

“Those tempura tara buds were delicious,” Aliya concurred. “And oh, the butterbur sprouts!”

“But we barely got *anything*,” said Ijuin. “Feel like it was just scraps at that point ’cause there were too many people. Also, the shepherd’s purse was nasty.”

Their lazy conversation was suddenly cut short when they spotted something. Something stirring close by in the grass towering over them. It took off into the sky.

Ein acted swiftly and silently. In one fluid motion, she aimed her rifle, fired a single bullet, and the creature fell back to the earth with a thump. It flaunted flashy green feathers all the way down its neck and along its stomach, and bright red skin beset both its eyes. A green pheasant. Male. It most definitely wasn’t the sort of bird a city kid would be used to seeing.

Yu was speechless.

Ein was not. “I wanted to help.”

Night had fallen. Ijuin’s suggestion that they check out the hardware store near Ayabe Station, just off the San’in Line, for cooking utensils and bottled water had been a smart one. They had set up a wooden table out in the spacious parking lot with whatever random chairs they could find inside, everything illuminated by an LED lantern.

“I totally get why people hole up in shopping malls in zombie flicks now,” Ijuin said. “Can’t go wrong when the place has everything you’d ever need!”

“And there’s not a soul to bother us!” Aliya agreed cheerfully.

Ijuin kept a keen, if impatient, eye on the rice boiling on the bunsen burner. It was a less than ideal method but nothing they weren’t used to by now, and there was plenty of gas and charcoal to light their fires. Aliya also

made good use of their fuel as bacon sizzled on her grill, which she *insisted* was “totally fine,” despite the best-by date on its vacuum-sealed packaging stating otherwise.

Meanwhile, Ein was finishing her own task. The freshly killed pheasant’s blood was drained, feathers plucked, guts removed, and was beautifully carved into meat that actually resembled food.

Yu regarded her handiwork with admiration. “Wow. Reminds me of that hunter guy from back in Maizuru.”

Among the many residents trapped in the city, there had been an especially skilled huntsman and farmer. He would sometimes bring in boar or deer from the mountains, and Yu and Ijuin would help butcher them. Until one day, he encountered a pack of wild dogs and never returned. Just like all the rest.

Ein arched an eyebrow, uncertain of how to react to the boy’s praises. “I wouldn’t consider this particularly impressive,” she said.

“Really?” Yu questioned. “Wait, I thought the elves were vegetarians. Professor Chloe was, anyway.”

“Abstaining from meat is a practice observed by the sages. Those of royal blood are warriors—huntsmen and huntresses. We abide by different rules.”

“Culture, huh?” Yu mused as he eyed the pheasant. The breast meat, its thighs, the neck, the tenderloin, the sinew of its tail, its wings. How he wanted to devour every inch of it, including the gizzard and offal, but it was too dangerous to consume the innards of wild game. Sadly, Yu would have to control his urges. He peered into the stainless dutch oven, boiling with the bird’s extracted bones. “Fitting that we’re having pheasant hot pot in the countryside.”

The aroma of cooking sake and ginger wafted from the soup. Soon, the salty, golden delicacy would be complete.

Yu’s job for the night’s dinner was the entree, but he wasn’t satisfied with simply stewing a hunk of meat in a pot of water. Thus, joining his concoction were rehydrated shiitake mushrooms, glass noodles, various freshly picked greens, and the highest quality kombu he could get his hands on. He even added a dash of watercress he had found growing by the river to combat the meat’s gaminess.

Ein watched with keen interest. “You’re very skilled, Yu. I respect it. I can only roast meat, myself,” she said. The charming girl’s face lingered uncomfortably close to his own, her commanding eyes set intently on every move Yu made.

“I never planned on living with my parents for long,” Yu muttered, trying to speak over the flustered beating of his heart. “And I try to watch what I eat, so I picked up on it. My mom and dad were foodies and they taught me a lot.”

Yu was a twig of a boy, but he refused to stunt his growth by working out until he was fully grown. Until then, the best workout for him was good sleep and a proper diet, thank you very much.

"Is it not Japanese custom to stay with one's family until they come of age?" asked Ein.

"I played soccer. Wanted to go pro," Yu replied. "Even made it into the Urawa youth team. And if you don't end up on a Tokyo team, chances are you'll end up going overseas instead, you know?"

"Sock-err?" she parroted awkwardly.

"I'll teach you if we ever find a ball laying around somewhere."

Before leaving Tokyo, Yu had been practically inseparable from his ball. But he'd lost it during the military's retreat—or "repositioning", as they liked to diplomatically term it. He hadn't so much as touched a soccer ball in ages.

"God, there's that smell!" Ijuin cried, full of emotion. "It's done!"

That indescribable scent of freshly cooked rice filled the air.

"God, I haven't had actual rice in *ages*!" cried Ijuin.

"Oh, how I've dreamed of this day!" Aliya all but wept. "We need to find some nori next and make rice balls!"

"I didn't know plain white rice could make a man cry!" Yu sniveled.

Ein remained thoroughly placid while the emotional Japanese middle schoolers stuffed their faces with the food of their home. Aliya, although half elf, had lived all her life in Japan and shared the boys' sentimental attachment to the dish.

"The processed fat and grease on this bacon will be the death of me," Aliya said between mouthfuls of rice from the mountain on her paper plate. "And I do not care!"

"How long's it been since we had pork?" Ijuin asked.

"The broth in the pheasant soup is so awesome!" Yu exclaimed. "The meat's a little tough, but it totally works! Ugh, I haven't had real meat in so long, I can feel the protein seeping into my muscles."

"You have my compliments for the presentation. Forming it into meat balls was a great choice," said Aliya.

"I added some ginger and miso to give it a little spice," said Yu. "I was planning on turning the leftover broth into a stock for udon if you guys still have room for more."

"Absolutely!" Aliya vehemently agreed. "My mouth's watering already!"

"And then we top it off with some zosui soup!" Ijuin shouted. "Don't you worry, I got two stomachs!"

The starved youths ate well that night. They downed bottles of barley and oolong tea and made merry over the taste of a better time. Ein watched quietly, affectionately, as she enjoyed her own meal in respectful silence, deftly handling her chopsticks without difficulty. But when they were done

and their rice soup was polished away, Yu produced one final item, and her attitude changed.

"Yu!" she exclaimed.

"You said you wanted sweets, right?" Yu opened the can of peaches and emptied the contents into a bowl. "Maybe you'll like this."

Stars sparkled in Ein's eyes. She took a small nibble of a piece of fruit, a gulp of the clear, syrupy liquid, and then promptly drooped her head. Yu almost leaned over to see what was wrong, when her shoulders started to tremble. A grin spread across her face and a broken chuckle escaped her lips.

"This..." Her voice broke. "What is this?!" she cried. "What is this nectar of the heavens?! Yu, this is quite possibly the greatest thing I've ever tasted in *both* of my lives!"

"It's just canned fruit!" blurted Yu.

"You remembered my love of sweets!" she proclaimed as if shouting it to the world, positively beaming. It was nearly blinding. Yu's heart skipped a beat and he turned away, only to be met with her gaze yet again as she peeked back at him, her smile in full bloom. "As your future bride, it warms my heart to see you act with such consideration."

"Okay, time out! My future *what*?! When did that happen?!"

"Am I so wrong? Over these last days, this fondness I have for you, this bond of fate between us has only grown stronger, I feel."

"Aliya, Ijuin, a little help with Her Highness over here?" Yu pleaded.

"Hey, if that's what she wants," Ijuin said. "It's not like you're losing out here, dude."

"Yu is certainly out of his league, but that hasn't stopped some couples in the past. I'd love to be a bridesmaid," Aliya jokingly offered.

"Neither of you are helping!"

The night went on and only quieted down when the futons procured from the hardware store were laid out, and it became time to rest. The group slept like logs and started their morning whenever their weary bodies felt like it. Consequently, they had a late breakfast.

"Yu! Rice balls!" Aliya shouted excitedly.

"You inspired him! Nice!" Ijuin commended her.

"Something like that," Yu said. "I made some tuna-mayo ones, some with canned chicken and spam. Oh, and these are fried with miso."

"I take back what I said last night," said Aliya. "I'm marrying you for myself!"

"Now, now," Ein said sharply. "I would choose my words more carefully if I were you, daughter of Chloe."

For lunch, they went the extra mile and boiled some somen noodles, threw on some canned mackerel, some ginger, a sprinkle of white sesame seeds, and mixed it with miso, then washed it all down with some coffee, brewed straight from the beans. And for once, they just chilled out.

"Feels nice to get to relax after months of, well, everything," Ijuin said.

“We won’t be able to bring everything with us, so I suppose we should enjoy it while we can,” said Aliya.

“In that case, let’s go all out,” Yu suggested. “I saw a few different kinds of flour, so I bet we could make some gyoza.”

“I think I saw some hot plates!” Aliya added.

“And with that solar-powered generator, we got ourselves a party!” Ijuin hollered.

That evening, dinner was shoyu ramen, accompanied by the highly anticipated gyoza. Freeze-dried vegetables garnished the instant noodles, while another pheasant Ein had acquired would substitute well enough for chashu. Tying the breast meat up in string and zipping it up in a cooking bag, they submerged it in boiling water and let it sit for about an hour to simulate a slow cooker. The slow, gentle process made for exceptionally juicy and tender meat. The rest of the meat was minced and parceled in gyoza wrappers with some garlic and ginger.

“It’s nice getting to cook for once,” Yu said.

“Yeah, you’re always grumblin’ about retorts and instant stuff,” Ijuin heckled.

“I don’t want to hear that from Mister ‘Licks Oil and Margarine Straight From the Container.’ That was gross, man.”

“Hey. Do not underestimate the siren call of pure, concentrated fat.”

“Oh, you made dessert gyoza too?” Aliya asked.

Ein winced from sheer emotion. “How can there be so many kinds of sweetness?!” she demanded. “Each and every one unique and precious as a gemstone!”

“There’s chocolate ones, dried fruit ones, ones with jam,” Aliya went on. “This one’s milk chocolate. And this one pineapple! And peaches too!” she raved. “If Yu hadn’t captured my heart before, he’s certainly captured my stomach.”

“Aliya, please,” Yu begged. “Ein looks like she’s about ready to kill someone.”

The next day was more of the same. Yu and his friends idly passed the time, their weary bodies and minds understandably unwilling to abandon their one paradise. But Aliya’s discovery within a Kyoto area guidebook quickly changed things.

“Look at this!” she shouted. “It says there’s a natural hot spring just a little ways away. We could all take real baths!”

“That is good news,” Ein said with good cheer. “I, personally, take my hygiene very seriously.”

“But aren’t those usually pumped out of the ground with machines?” Yu wondered skeptically.

“It could be naturally flowing,” Ijuin murmured. “If it is a pump, though, who says we can’t figure something out?”

“I like your optimism, Ijuin,” said Ein. “Naturally, I will do what I can as well!”

They had maintained cleanliness as best they could, making do with wiping themselves down with cloths whenever possible, but without enough of the scarce clean water to justify setting up even a primitive drum bath, no one was getting a proper soak anytime soon. In short, the decision was a quick one. Yu, Ijuin, Aliya, and Ein packed the van with as much food as it could fit and set off.

The trip lasted a few short hours, and then, in the desolate streets of the old country neighborhood, the hunt for the hot spring began.

Aliya exhaled a long and deep sigh. “I think I’m going to live here now.”

“I can sympathize,” said Ein. “There’s little else quite as soothing as a warm bath.”

The toil and pains they had gone through to arrive at this one reticent bathhouse in the middle of Kyoto prefecture seemed to ripple away with the pacifying spring water. They weren’t naked, of course. Ein wore a checkered, frilled bikini that accentuated all the right curves of the Replicant girl’s body. Almost a little too well for some of the other bathgoers. Aliya, on the other hand, had a swimsuit that appeared to be a black one-piece from the front, but a lack of fabric around the back revealed it to be closer to a bikini. It might as well have been a lacy negligee.

Yu did his best to keep his awkward glances to himself while he and Ijuin enjoyed the water in their own swimsuits.

“I’m turning to mush over here,” Yu sighed.

“Wanna have some soda when we get out?” Ijuin said. “I’ve got ’em all chilled in that mini fridge we found.”

The boys’ minds were a million miles away, awash in pure, relieving bliss.

They were supposed to be taking turns, but no one was selfless or patient enough to endure the waiting, and so this was the only solution. Aside from the hot spring, there was even a hot stone spa and a little shop, from which the girls had procured the swimsuits that allowed them to soak together as they now did.

“Yu. I’m curious,” Ein spoke up. “Now that you’ve finally had the chance to truly take in my body, what are your thoughts?”

“I’m not touching that,” Yu said flatly. “What am I even supposed to say?”

“Bro, I’d tell it to her straight,” Ijuin egged on. “What’s there to lose?”

“Call me crazy, but I think he’s more interested in *my* swimsuit than Ein’s,” Aliya said playfully. “Those mature types can be awfully intimidating. You’d be much happier marrying me, you know?”

“Can we please stop with these jokes?” Yu groaned.

Ein shot a look at Aliya and sharpened her voice with a regal edge. “Yes, I agree,” she said. “Scoundrels who pilfer what isn’t theirs are apt to lose their hands, *you know*?”

Aliya stuck her tongue out and replied with a mischievous smirk, then sank into the water up to her shoulders and murmured, “I’m not sure where happiness is other than here, to be honest. With just us. Something tells me that we’re bound to find ourselves in trouble again the moment we run into other people.”

How little they knew of the truth lurking behind those words.

4

“I knew what to expect, but it’s still hard to believe,” Yu muttered inside the Mark III. “Seeing it doesn’t make it any easier.”

Yu hovered four hundred meters in the air, above the summits of Satsukiyama and Minooyama, two mountains in the north of Osaka prefecture. Half a year ago, they would have commanded breathtaking views of the port city to the south, the Osakan megalopolis tangled in a jungle of buildings and roads anywhere the mountainous terrain permitted. Now, though, the only kingdom that the peaks reigned over was an ocean of water. The Osaka Plain and the cities it cradled had become the seafloor to the Osaka Bay.

Yu, high in the sky, could see all the way to the shores of Kobe and Himeji, and that the waters had engulfed them just the same. The greater

metropolitan area of Japan's Kansai region was destroyed. It was Tokyo all over again.

"Mom told me something once," Aliya transmitted to Yu, breaking him from his trance. "She said that the waters and winds of Kansai had been cursed last September, three months after what happened in Tokyo."

"Then they got it too," said Ijuin. "The typhoons, the rain, the flooding..."

The Mark III shared its perspective with Aliya and Ijuin through their HMD goggles. Their voices were low. Toneless.

Yu turned northeast. "Kyoto's flooded too."

"Whole Yodo River System's overflowed. The entire basin's filled with water," Ijuin said. "God, the ocean reaches all the way up to Kyoto now."

"This isn't Osaka Bay anymore," Aliya murmured. "It's the Great Kansai Bay now."

The Mark III's long-range scope only brought empty sighs from the trio.

"Why don't I just take this thing and have a quick look at Kyushu and Hokkaido?" Yu suggested. The thought had crossed his mind on more than one occasion. "It wouldn't take me more than a few hours."

"I wouldn't try it," Ijuin refused. "Like I said, we don't want you in that thing for long."

"He's right," Aliya agreed. "The longest you've been armorized was your first fight, and that was only for fifteen minutes and forty-two seconds. The last thing we need is for you to tempt fate with an extended flight."

Yu surrendered and began to smoothly descend, stabilized by the anti-gravity lifters, until he entered a low hover at about the same altitude as the Tokyo Skytree.

Toyonaka had been an up-and-coming commuter city in Osaka prefecture. The Tamba Highlands weren't too far north and the terrain was dominated by green and nature. Most of which was now underwater. Yu landed on a runway, splashing into the saltwater that flooded the old Osaka International Airport, a relic of an interconnected world. The Mark III was almost knee-deep, yet it was still only low tide. Small fish darted between his legs. Dry land was still about a kilometer north—the new coastline of the Great Kansai Bay that extended all the way to Hyogo prefecture at just about the 35th parallel.

Yu took off once more and activated the Mark III's optical camouflage. The black and gold armor melted away into the background and became virtually invisible. He flew north-northeast for about five kilometers, carefully, almost perfectly silent without the jet stream thrusters, before landing stealthily in a residential area filled with nothing but houses and apartment complexes. His friends were waiting there with the van.

Although sparse, the occasional passerby was becoming more common. They weren't alone anymore.

Yu slinked into the van with his camouflage still on, then de-armorized when he was free from any potentially prying eyes. Better to avoid the

trouble that would undoubtedly come from the Mark III's sudden return.

A week had passed since leaving Maizuru. After an easygoing journey over mountains and hills, through various detours, they came to a city in Hyogo prefecture called Kawanishi. To some, it was considered the mouth of the Tamba Highlands.

Yu and company had begun to see people again, but they did not receive a warm welcome. Small patrol groups carrying threatening guns gave their van distrustful stares, making it more than evident that their presence was not wanted. Shattered glass and battered doors decorated nearly every building like some sort of slum town. The atmosphere was, in a word, unsettling.

The team drove to the water's edge, then started gathering information. An airborne mic snooped in on a conversation while the others listened to the audio feed from the van.

"You hear about that car that showed up this morning?" a voice asked.

"You think it's rescue?" another said hopefully. "Never mind, probably not. Prob'ly just a bunch of outsiders looking for a place to squat."

"Not like we're ones to talk. Wait, you're a local, ain't cha?"

"Yeap," a voice grunted. "Can't expect anyone to lend us a hand anymore. Gotta rebuild by ourselves if we wanna make it. Just hope those outsiders don't cause problems."

"Gonna be trouble if it's robbers again."

By the tones of the indistinct voices, these men were not to be played with.

Ijuin heaved a sigh from the driver's seat. "Aren't Takarazuka and Minoo near here? I'm really not getting the uptown, high-class vibe you'd expect from a place like this," he grumbled. "Guess most of these folks aren't from around here."

"There must have been a lot of troublemakers before," Aliya surmised. "It sounds like they're a sort of militia, or local police force."

Ein picked up her Type 89 without hesitation. "Hard information will carry us further than conjecture. Let's speak with the people directly."

"At gunpoint?" Yu asked.

"It wouldn't be particularly wise to wander an area like this without protection, now, would it?"

"Are we in twenty-first century Japan or a western?" Aliya mumbled.

Yu couldn't very well argue with the seasoned warrior girl. They parked the van somewhere discreet, then followed the street by foot in the direction with the most people.

Monorail tracks and elevated railways extended east to west. Below, on a local road, a kind of bustling shopping district had blossomed, barricaded at both ends to prevent vehicles from entering and strewn with a plethora of stands and stalls. The street even bordered a large university campus.

It seemed like forever since they had last seen so many people. A crowd of well over a hundred lingered about, haggling at shops, chatting over food and drink, but what was strange was that the vast majority of them were men. The treacherous air about the place seemed to have scared most of the women and children away, probably for the better.

The four of them entered the chaotic jumble and at once their heads were swimming.

“They’ve got a little town goin’ on here!” Ijuin exclaimed.

“I was expecting something more like a refugee camp,” Aliya said.

“Hey, look, they’re selling vegetables over there,” said Yu, glancing at one of the stalls. “Five thousand yen for one head of cabbage?!”

Yu looked again. The exorbitant price on the label plastered to the cardboard box piled with vegetables did not change.

“That guy’s got potato chips at seven thousand a bag,” Ijuin continued incredulously. “A bar of chocolate for *ten thousand yen*.”

“I just saw a stand selling cutlery for fifty-three thousand each,” Aliya added to the absurdity. “These prices are out of control.”

Ein put a hand to her chin thoughtfully and said, “Commodities grow scarce during war, thus their value goes up. It’s an accurate measure of troubled times, to be sure.”

The street was abuzz with life and an amalgam of voices of varying accents and dialects, not just the local variety. So it was strange when the sounds died out all at once and dozens of eyes fell directly onto Yu and his companions. More specifically, onto Ein and Aliya’s pointed ears.

“That elf’s got a cute face,” a man rasped.

“That’s how they trick ya, ya idiot,” another said. “Thing’s no better than the monsters.”

“This is all their fault,” one growled under his breath.

“We’ll hafta take ’em in. Them’s got guns. Might cause trouble like the other lot.”

“What if they’re scouts?” another man hissed. “From the other side.”

“What if they call their friends?!” one blubbered.

Maizuru had its fair share of Takedas, but what Yu felt from these people was entirely different. An altogether unique sort of danger. Malicious whispers thrummed with vague ill intent while the gazes on Aliya and Ein oozed a palpable foulness. Aliya cowered behind her, and the Replicant girl faced the crowd directly, her almond-shaped eyes unblinking, unwavering.

“Why don’t you folks come on over this way?” a kindly man beckoned. “Just want to ask a few questions. We don’t wanna be in anyone’s way, though, so we oughta go somewhere private. You can go ahead and leave that scary toy you’ve got there behind.” He pointed to the rifle on Ein’s shoulder, smiling. “Whazza matter, little lady? They speak Japanese where you’re from?”

The eyes behind the man's deceptive smile were dead. The geniality was a ploy. There was an obvious air of cynical caution about him, and though Ein regarded the man with courtesy, she didn't let her guard down.

Aliya yipped. Someone grabbed her shoulder and several men from the crowd started to pull and yank on the half-elf, trying to whisk her away. Her face distorted in fear. She was paralyzed.

"Yu," came a commlink from Ein, "I'd rather not complicate things, but should matters get any worse..."

"*I know. I'll do what I can*," Yu telepathically replied.

Yu took one step towards his endangered friend, fully prepared to use the Mark III, when someone beat him to the punch. The mob of men suddenly parted and a human being fell straight from the sky. Yu shouted with a start. The girl couldn't have been older than a teenager, and the sleeves of some loose, coat-like garment fluttered like wings. She landed with what could only have been intentionally bombastic showiness.

All eyes were on her. The girl stood up, not even flinching from the fall, and confronted the crowd.

"All right, folks, move along now, nothin' to see here!" she yelled out with a devil-may-care voice. "Beat it!"

Yu realized that she was wearing traditional Japanese dress. Except, not exactly. She had a casual tank top on and a pair of shorts, but draped over that she wore an extraordinarily flamboyant furisode—snow white and embellished with peony patterns—like it was a coat. Her hair was dyed bright red and done up in a ponytail.

"C'mon, fellas, I'm being polite here," she said. "Don't feel like doing your pal Natsuki a favor? Maybe I'll stop feeling like beating up monsters for you."

The girl's appearance did far more than stand out. It brought her straight through to sore thumb territory. She was an attractive girl, except there was one more notably ostentatious aspect about her—the katana sheathed on her back.

5

Fifteen minutes was all it took for the team to find themselves in a completely different world. The girl in the furisode had guided them through the neighboring university and up to the third floor of one of the buildings on campus.

"Natsuki Hatano," she said. "Seventeen. Ex-high schooler. Nice to meetcha." Natsuki and her one-in-a-million smile monopolized an entire sofa meant for three people, her shapely legs folded into a lazy pretzel shape.

The old lecture hall was huge, and all the chairs and desks had been replaced with tables, couches, and legless tatami chairs, all resting on a large and cozy rug. There was the occasional firearm, metal bat, or gardening hoe, but nothing too out of the ordinary given the way things were. Several people lounged around the room, and they were all women.

“I don’t see as many men here as outside,” Yu noted.

“Well, they tend to have trouble keeping their hands to themselves,” Natsuki said. “So this is where all the people who need protecting go to help each other. And ya girl Natsuki’s their personal bodyguard!”

On their way through campus, the vast majority of people they passed had been women. Many had been foreign, with skin tones and hair of all colors and types.

Natsuki turned to look out the window near her couch. The view from up here was incredible. “They just wanna protect their town.” She gave a sarcastic shrug. “But they take it too far sometimes. Especially when it comes to outsiders or ladies. I keep watch and make sure they aren’t getting up to no good, and that’s how I found you guys. Knew something was gonna go down when I saw elves.”

“Oh, thank you!” Aliya shouted, still shuddering from the experience. “Thank you so, so much!”

Something was puzzling Yu. If she had been keeping watch from the third floor, and she had fallen from the sky, she couldn’t have...

“The whole crowd broke apart the moment you showed up.” Ijuin marveled at the mysterious ex-high schooler. “Gotta say, you were pretty amazing.”

“Aww, shucks, no way,” Natsuki replied, her pitiful attempt at humility shattered by the smarmy grin plastered on her face. She winked at Aliya and Ein. “I had an ulterior motive this time.”

“Please, tell us how we might repay you,” said Ein. The clone princess glanced at the katana leaning against the sofa. “You’re clearly a distinguished fighter in this community. It’s only right that your valor be returned in kind.”

Natsuki laughed. “Thank ya kindly. I am pretty strong.” Her expression settled into something somber. “But not everyone. The sick, elderly, kids, they slip away so easily. Sure, there’s food if you can till soil, cast a line, or hold a gun, and we get water from the purification plant, but medicine? Gauze?” She trailed off into silence. “Whatever government there is in Kyushu, they’ve left us out to dry. Our radios don’t even work anymore.” She threw her hands up and continued, “Being strong only gets ya so far. I was at my wit’s end for a while, when I started hearing rumors.” The girl looked them over. “About an island of elves in Osaka Bay. You wouldn’t happen to be from there, would you?”

“What if we were?” Ein countered.

“I’d ask you to take me and my pals back home with ya!”

“Very well.”

“Okay, that was fast!” said Yu. “You’re sure about this?”

“Yeah!” Aliya said. “You can’t just—”

“Can I not?” Ein interjected. “If the elves will not have them, then we’ll simply find them another haven to the best of our ability.” Her voice resounded with clear and commanding grace. “A replica I may be, but within me is a royal and noble blood. I can not do my mother the injustice of forsaking people in need.” A smile came to her lips. Simple and artless. “We cannot save everyone, true. But what wrong is there in wanting to leave a wake of happiness at our backs?”

Yu felt a pang in him. Of amazement. But partly of jealousy. How could someone be so unequivocally kind? So unconditionally generous?

Yu put those questions aside and asked, “Natsuki, did you say your radios aren’t working?”

“Uh-huh,” she replied. “This place used to be pretty safe from the Anomalies—until one of those phantom castles showed up. Haven’t been able to contact anyone ever since.” She sounded almost indifferent. “I swear, not even the town’s safe from the monsters anymore. I’ve already got my hands full! I don’t need the idiots getting more trigger-happy than they already are!”

A bell tolled. Natsuki scowled and took up her katana.

“God, they’re everywhere,” Ijuin said. “Where did all those tentacles come from? How many even is that?”

“A surveillance droid is currently counting,” Aliya said. “We’re already past 152. It’s unreal.”

A MUV Bumblebee streamed the situation directly to Aliya’s and Ijuin’s HMD goggles. Ein looked down nearby, surveying the town from the campus building’s rooftop. She didn’t need assistance to tell what was going on.

Countless white tentacles were writhing from the ocean. Suction cups dotted their length, reminiscent of some kind of squid or octopus. They wrapped themselves around every building or unlucky individual that they could, crushing wooden structures and cracking concrete. Any humans caught in their grasp shriveled into empty husks.

“Leecher of life,” Ein muttered. “A kumbhanda lurks beneath the waves.”

The town struggled to meet the enemy. The men who had assaulted Aliya fired on the tentacles with hunting rifles, shotguns, and military-issue Type 89s, and while the bullets opened gaping holes in the trunks of wriggling flesh, the enemy was unimpeded. The seemingly invincible life-form went for the shooters, and they summarily withered away. And yet, the offensive continued as close-range forces advanced.

“N-Types!” Ijuin exclaimed. The fighters wore Normal-Type Exo-Frames —bulkier off-shoots of the A-Type that looked like the wearer had attached

barrels to their arms and legs. They lacked flight capabilities, but came stocked with an arsenal of weaponry and a powerful punch to boot. “No way. If they’ve got those, then some of them have gotta be survivors from the Defense Force!”

The soldiers armed themselves with combat knives the size of hatchets and sliced at the tentacles, not wildly, but precisely, with experienced technique. They had clearly been trained. Their blades severed the appendages like butter. Evidently, they were the same vibroblades that the Mark III had access to, though it still wasn’t enough to stop the tendrils’ rampage. The serpent-like limbs slithered around the attackers, their titanium shells the only thing protecting them from the life-draining suckers. Even still, the soldiers flailed their knives against the foe.

But there was one less clumsy presence on the battlefield. One who evaded the tentacles effortlessly and with style.

Ijuin noticed her first and shouted, “Dude, that’s sick! Natsuki’s moving like water down there!”

Steel flashed and the peony furisode fluttered like the wings of a butterfly as Natsuki Hatano, the samurai girl, danced upon her stage, uttering spirited shouts when she leaped from one side to the other. Even amidst the chaos, she was grinning from ear to ear.

She was never in one place for more than a second, and by the time a tentacle came down she had already flown meters away, almost as if she had teleported. But she wasn’t only incredibly lithe. Even as she weaved among the innumerable appendages, she still slipped in clean and fierce flourishes of her katana.

“You guys don’t quit!” she laughed with glee. “Lucky for you, I’m a girl who likes her theatrics!”

With every brandish of her blade, a tendril fell. And when the stump continued to move, it was pruned yet shorter, until less than a meter remained of the anomalous flesh. The clippings undulated on the ground powerlessly. Natsuki’s swordplay amputated tentacle after tentacle with terrifying power, speed, and artistry. Not even the slippery ooze coating her katana could dull its edge. And try as it might, the enemy could not cage her.

“Where ya aiming? I’m over here!” she cried. “Tell you what, catch me and I’ll owe you a drink! How’s amazake sound?”

Her smile was like a firecracker, and this battle of life and death but a game.

Fiery as the blazing hair on her head, flowing as the furisode on her arms, powerful as the katana she wielded, and joyous in the face of danger. That was Natsuki Hatano. A modern-day kabukimono plucked straight from Japan’s feudal past.

Aliya fixed her eyes on her. “That sword,” she said. “It’s a monomolecular blade! It’s exceptionally sharp, but I thought only the military had them. And the way she moves… Who is that girl?”

There was one more unique soldier taking the field as well. His pitch-black armor shimmered gold in the sunlight. Yu fought with just as much bravery, flying back and forth, cleaving his hand-turned-vibroblade through the enemy, emulsifying them with ultrasonic waves emitted from his palm, and mowing them down with bursts of wind from the jet stream thrusters. Tentacles split apart, turned to chunks, were blown to pieces, but it was taking too long.

"Yu, the surveillance droid has finished acquiring the targets!" Aliya reported.

"*Thanks!*" said Yu's voice over commlink. "*Ein, the Gospel!*"

"Its power is yours," Ein said. "Use it as you see fit!"

At last, Yu soared into the sky. The droid had already calibrated the system and targeted all 1,062 tentacles encroaching from the sea.

"Ijuin, can you manually ignore any enemies near Natsuki?" Yu asked.

"*Uh. Why?*" he said.

"I think the droids will just get in her way. We need to give her as much space as possible."

"Good point! I'll see what I can do."

Natsuki's region soon disappeared from the area of effect. *That was fast,* Yu thought. *Leave it to Ijuin to know his way around nanotech.*

Then, just as quickly, it came.

—Witness the truth. Envision vajra.

—See, says the Enlightened One, true strength in tathata.

—Give form to invincible serenity, flawless as the full moon.

Ein's melodious voice resounded and the Prayer Wheel began to spin. Adaptive nanofactors fell from the Mark III, just like they had against the army of trolls.

"We got this, Mark III," Yu muttered.

"The MUV Chakrams are online!" Aliya transmitted.

Exactly five thousand annular droids had materialized seemingly out of thin air. They swarmed down to the earth, spinning, and shredded the white tentacles all over town. As durable as the tendrils were, they could do nothing in tiny pieces.

A man's shriek was cut short, and he glanced around him, dazed. "I'm saved?"

"What was that just now?" another wondered to himself.

"Number Three?" one said, uncertain for a moment. "Hey. Hey, look up! It's Three!"

"Devicer Three! Son of a bitch, you're right!"

Once the men of the town recovered from their stupor, pulled away from the embrace of imminent death, one by one they began to look up and point at the same thing. The Mark III—Yu Ichinose.

“What the heck, why can they see me?!” Yu shouted.

“Duh! Of course they can!” Aliya chided. “Did you think the optical camouflage would just stay on while you whipped out every weapon in your arsenal?”

“Don’t worry about it! As long as they don’t see your face,” said Ijuin.

“Yu,” came Ein’s voice, “Natsuki could use your assistance. Her weapon is failing her.”

Yu jetted towards the Osaka International Airport at once. There, on the runway flooded with seawater at low tide, Natsuki was fighting as a one-woman army. She flitted from one place to the next, putting tentacles to her katana-shaped monomolecular blade, but their viscous mucus was finally beginning to blunt her cutting power. Yu tore a piece of the yellow scarf around his neck and the Holy Shroud entered Excalibur Mode. He swiftly dispatched a tentacle approaching her from behind.

“Oh?” Natsuki said. “A big strong man came to save me?”

“Came to give you a little hand,” Yu replied. “Take it.”

“Hm?” Natsuki accepted the Holy Saber without a second thought, but hummed at the Devicer with a skeptically arched eyebrow. “Have we met before?”

Yu immediately wanted to kick himself. She had recognized his voice. This, he realized, was what the voice changer was for. He ignored her question and took off into flight before he could screw something else up.

This time heading offshore, Yu scanned the ocean and ejected more nanofactors. “Ein!” he called. “I think it’s time we drag that thing out.”

“Very well! The titan’s hand is yours!” Ein declared. “Command it well!”

The nanofactors began to form into a new auxiliary droid, and before long, a giant arm flew abreast the Mark III—a great limb the size and semblance of what might be seen on a superpowered mecha from any number of anime Yu had seen. MUV Puppeteer.

The Multifunction Unmanned Vehicle moved like magic, exactly to Devicer Three’s will. From end to end it measured about fifteen meters, easily as large as a fighter jet, as if the arm of a titan had been severed at the elbow and suspended in air. Yu thrust his fist out—and the droid broke the sound barrier as it immediately slammed into the water. A great wave surged, but Yu was not taking his frustrations out on the ocean floor. He was after what the surveillance droid had identified there—the source of the tentacles.

It was a direct hit. The punch landed squarely on the hidden Anomaly. The arm of the ferrous giant captured the massive creature in its iron grip and hauled it up to Yu, breaking the water’s surface with a rush of crashing waves. A squid creature of over twenty meters long hung in its grasp.

“Anomaly identified!” Aliya said. “It’s a kraken! Threat level A!”

Even as the report came in, Yu was delivering the killing blow. He tore through the wind directly at the creature’s single grotesque eye, rolling his leg back and initiating the electromagnetic contractor. Without slowing

down, Yu threw his entire weight into a crackling kick of electricity, and the monster perished instantly. The arm droid flung the kraken's limp body far away.

They had made it out once again.

Yu looked southwest as he caught his breath. The long-range scope flagged the location of an enemy stronghold thirty-three kilometers off the coast, and an accompanying window showed a crystalline palace of forbidding beauty resting on a lotus pedestal atop the water. The portal-keep's status read "Aerial"—immaterial.

"The elf settlement is beyond there, isn't it?" Yu said.

"Let's send a droid out to check!" Ijuin suggested.

"It can herald our arrival," added Ein. "Send word that the Asura has chosen its new master."

"I'll input the message," said Aliya.

Yu stared at the threat on his screen that stood between them and their destination. He sighed.

Natsuki wielded the strange sword with skill, pouncing here and there like an acrobat and carving up tentacles. She slew the last of them and exhaled heavily. She had survived, unscathed.

"Nearly had me there," she breathed. She hadn't anticipated the appendages' secretions to hamper her monomolecular blade to such a degree.

Devicer Three's sword melted from her hand. Such a curious weapon. Its edge had been keener than her own. But what piqued her interest more was the voice of its owner.

"Guess you can't judge a book by its cover." She gazed out over the ocean at a point in the sky. "A tiny little nerd like that. The hero behind the mask," she said with a twinge of humor. "Think I found some new friends."

Number Three was far enough away that the average person would never be able to make him out.

But Natsuki's eyes were fixed.

"They're augmented too. I can feel it."

Chapter 4: The Osakan Escape

1

Unlike its northern cousin, Osaka Bay, Wakayama Bay hadn't changed since the Evacuation. In its mouth, a once well-traveled strait known as the Kii Channel, situated around 34°N and somewhere on the Shikoku end of 134°E, was a city on the water. A floating settlement of elves by the name of Nayuta. Sandwiched between the island of Shikoku and the Kii Peninsula, the self-sustaining community approximately 10 kilometers wide boasted scatterings of groves, fields of grain, and a tower in the middle that touched the skies 300 meters above. Factories and residences occupied the inner reaches.

All of it was thanks to Project Dvipa, a collaborative effort between the sage-run Elvish Foundation, numerous Japanese construction companies, and the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology.

It was the first of April. Half past four. The sun wasn't even over the horizon when the outdated cargo freighter left the artificial island's port.

"I was really hoping I wouldn't have to do this," Jurota Shiba murmured.

The thirty-two-year-old man was of average height and build, but distinguished by the glasses hanging from his narrow face and his long, black hair tied into a loose ponytail, which was only kept so out of an impatience for haircuts more than as a fashion statement. Aside from those features, though, the young man was an exceptionally bland individual. All the way down to his beige blouson and khaki cargo pants.

He leaned against the ship's rail, his eyes darting at every shadow on the water. "We're sailing right towards a portal-keep. I swear, I might lose my lunch if those creatures show up."

Volonov gave the unkempt man a look. "Where're your sea legs, officer?" he said with a twinge of an accent.

After a string of unfortunate events, when Anomalies overran his home in the Kamchatka Peninsula, only for the same fate to befall him in Japan, Aleksei Volonov had found himself fortunate enough to indulge in the safety of Nayuta. His business in Japanese and Russian trade relations gave him a firm command of the local language as well, though many saw his hard-set expression and brawny upper body and assumed he was a gun-for-hire, or perhaps with the mafia. His short-sleeved shirt seemed to barely contain his chest.

"Don't mind me, just being the voice of reason," Shiba replied pitifully. "Osaka Bay isn't exactly smooth sailing these days. Or is it the Great Kansai Bay now? My point is the Osaka region seems a tad unsafe to me."

"Relax," the Russian man insisted. "We're giving the portal a wide berth. I've made the voyage a hundred times. Trust me. You'll not catch a whiff of an Anomaly."

"I'll hold you to that."

“Worse comes to worst, we’ve plenty of guns, army boy.”

“I’m decommissioned and for good reason, thank you!” Twenty or so other passengers were on board with them. Hunters, sailors, military men, people well accustomed to firearms and the rocking of the waves. And there were enough AK-47s for each of them, replicas of the original Russian model and all courtesy of Nayuta’s workshops for self-defense purposes. “I don’t remember a *lick* of basic training,” the former warrant officer professed. “And I was a pencil pusher, not a combatant.”

“Elves must like pencils,” Volonov said. “Or at least Speaker Nadal does. Enough to put you in charge of a squad in that new militia.”

“Rumors,” Shiba said, hastily waving his hand in denial. “There are positions that can’t be filled. The whole thing’s dead in the water.” He took out the carpenter bee from his pocket. “Or at least it should’ve been.”

The insect almost seemed real, its metalwork intricate and impossibly detailed. It would have been even more convincing if it’d had enough power to fly around.

“What’s that?” Volonov asked.

“A Pandemonium series auxiliary droid,” replied Shiba as he eyed the machine. “Among the twelve Asuras are three kings. The King of the Land, the King of the Sea, and the King of the Storm. This particular droid belongs to the ruler of the skies. And it had a very interesting message to give regarding its liege, and a person of very special interest to us.”

Shiba had been tasked with finding her, as well as the one whom she was with.

Far away from the human vessel crossing Earth’s waters was a spectral palace perched upon the waves. The pedestal keeping it afloat was in the shape of a lotus flower and stretched over a kilometer across. The castle glistened with translucent azure quartz composing every wall and column. Such a material would normally never suffice for a structure of this size, but for the archmages, this matter was trivial.

“It has been too long, Keeper of the Pride.”

“Quldald of the Whirlwind. Always a pleasure.”

In a secluded chamber, deep inside the crystal palace, a man and a girl spoke, keepers both. The young man was sharp, handsome, while the girl seemed to be no more than twelve or thirteen. She appeared so frail that the slightest breeze might shatter her porcelain skin.

The girl tittered. “Lioness Scullchance welcomes you, though she finds it untoward that you should neglect to herald your coming, fellow Dharva,” she said. “Oh, bless our friendship, for I cannot bear to turn you away!”

Scullchance leisurely crossed one leg over the other. The cloth draped over her slender body was primarily white with flourishes of ornate, floral embroidery. Her choice of seating was similarly striking, as she lounged not on any sort of chair, but on the back of a lion. The golden-maned beast, very much alive, rumbled a low growl at the unexpected intruder.

“For that, you have my sincerest apologies. Forgive me.” Quldald dipped his head. “As you know, my nature is as the wind, and damned be us all if one can say where next it shall blow.” For an instant, the man’s body literally vanished into thin air and a cyclone whirled within the chamber, before reshaping just as quickly into bodily form. “I hope my whimsies have caused no offense.”

Yu would have recognized his blue mantle and wooden staff as belonging to the one who had been at Maizuru. The one who had stood on the ramparts above the city and cast Death upon those below.

“Very well, but do not try my patience a second time,” Scullchance replied, her expression cold. “Now what brings you here?”

“News, my lady,” the man said. “Of the black and gold warrior.”

“I take it this individual’s hue is of little importance.”

“This *individual* has neared your domain. I once spied them on the battlefield, but he has changed since then,” Quldald stated. “He has become one with vajra, my lady.”

“You mean to tell me,” Scullchance spat, “that a species of chimpanzees has awakened the wheel of orison?” True, she had heard that the cowards of the wood had been aiding the local primitives in an attempt to unlock the ultimate door. But had they really succeeded? Truly? A chuckle escaped the girl. “Then I suppose congratulations are in order.”

The lion rumbled once more as the dainty predator on its back curled her lips into a vicious and bloodthirsty snarl.

2

One year ago, it was the city of Toyonaka. These days it was simply the coast of the Great Kansai Bay, but refugees still called it home and had built up a small yet flourishing community. At its heart was a street in the shadow of elevated railway tracks, packed with little shops and vendors neighboring a university. Along with educational facilities, the campus was home to a forest of wild birds and even a pond. Surrounded by walls, it was like an entirely separate society from the one outside.

“But it wouldn’t be such a big deal if those old farts out there could take a chill pill!” Natsuki snapped. “You can’t even go for a walk unless you’ve got an extra leg in your pants. So it’s a good thing all the girls with no one to look out for them can hole up here with families and other folk the guys can’t keep their hands off of. We’ve got some students and professors who used to go to school here too.”

The day after the kraken attack, Natsuki, Yu, and the rest of the group were having a late breakfast in what used to be a classroom. Batter sizzled on a hot plate on the table, powered by a solar generator. The savory, pancakey goodness that was okonomiyaki was nearly done.

“Yeah, I don’t remember seeing many women around town yesterday,” Aliya said.

The feminine-dominated university stood in stark contrast to the man's world that waited just outside its walls. Here, most of the men one could find were those with softer edges, fathers and the like, and there were people of all colors and nationalities.

"That definitely explains why these people don't give Ein or Aliya weird looks," said Yu.

Ein nodded. "It certainly feels more welcoming here."

"You have *no idea* how hard it was to get to this point," Natsuki dramatically groaned as she flipped the okonomiyaki. "It was like, three whole seasons worth of drama. But we got lucky. This place generates its own renewable energy, has a water purifier, the works."

"I was wondering about that," Ijuin commented. "You've got those big windmills and solar panels like the elves have at their labs. Superconductive motors, right?"

"Uh-huh. The school did some cosponsorship thing with their research."

The advent of advanced clean energy technology in the way of water reclamation, net-zero carbon emissions, and perpetual self-sufficiency for all energy demands were some of the migrant sages' greatest scientific contributions. Decades of such groundbreaking research were what would eventually give birth to self-sustaining grids like what was present here and at Maizuru, as well as the Asura Frame's own microgenerator.

"We used to just pump our own water from the pond and purify it ourselves," Natsuki said. "But then the townsfolk started picking fights over it, so we ended up putting another plant by the ocean, and now we share it."

"I imagine you found yourself in quite a few scuffles," Ein presumed.

"Oh, a few," Natsuki laughed with a bashful grin. "Gave a few bad guys what for, maybe gave a few badder guys a little more."

"Guess it's rough everywhere," Yu mumbled.

Yu's group had provided the flour for the batter they were frying. They had willingly shared all of their food, seeing as it was only fair if they would be imposing on them for the indefinite future. The cabbage, sprouts, eggs, and various other toppings came from the campus's own fields and farm hens. Unfortunately, they would have to do without mayonnaise, but the Worcestershire sauce, aonori seaweed, and pickled ginger more than made up for it.

When the okonomiyaki was done, no one waited to dig in, puffing on the steaming pancake before hissing at the heat as they stuffed their faces. Ein, meanwhile, was engrossed in the one pancake Yu had made and guarded it for herself.

"How?" Ein demanded after a single bite, her brow furrowed and fierce. "How do you keep doing it, Yu? The contrast between the airiness of the dough and the texture of the sugar, it's...it's divine! How do you continue to delight me so, Yu?!"

"You don't have to be so melodramatic," said Yu. "All I did was mix granulated sugar into the batter."

“Sugar-fried, eh?” Natsuki casually butt in. She leaned over the table and brought her face right up to Yu’s. “I like the way you think.”

Their noses were practically touching, and Yu could see every charming feature of the red-haired samurai girl’s profile. And then she started to sniff him. Yu nearly short-circuited from sheer awkwardness, when the hairs on his neck pricked up. He could feel something from her. But what?

Ein was already pouting. “Natsuki Hatano,” she scolded like an angry mother, “you would do well to remember that Yu is already spoken for. You cannot have him.”

“Oh, chill, I’m almost done,” Natsuki said. “I knew it. You were the big strong man!”

“H-How do you figure?” Yu asked, barely maintaining composure anymore.

“You’re him. The guy in the suit. You’re Devicer Three!”

“Th-That’s a pretty lofty accusation you’re throwin’ out there!” Ijuin stammered.

“Yu?” Aliya repeated with feigned incredulity. “Devicer Three? He’s a middle schooler!”

“I see your game,” said Natsuki. The most self-satisfied smirk that anyone had ever seen was smeared across her face. “Allow me to reintroduce myself. Name’s Natsuki Hatano, and I’m seventeen years old. Ex-high schooler and proud walloper of a tenth-dan kendo swordsman. I mastered traditional swordplay like it was nothing, nearly fell asleep fighting a sixth-dan judo master, and didn’t even need two hands to whoop an MMA champion. Also this.”

Natsuki held up the ring of light glowing in her right palm. A light that belonged solely to the nano-augmented.

“So wanna commlink? It’s pretty *handy*, huh?”

“I can’t believe she’s nano-augmented. Definitely explains how amazing she is.”

Yu was on a walk around campus after breakfast. He headed for the main gate, Ein following close at his side.

“I, too, was gifted with prajna—the key to ultimate wisdom,” Ein said. “My being was melded with nanomachines when I was created. It is how I access the Astral Library and the Gospel within.” Yu nodded. He had more or less pieced together that the “Mantra Server” sequence was caused by Ein’s nano-abilities. “However, my power is rooted within my mind and soul. Natsuki Hatano’s seems to manifest physically.” She glanced at Yu’s scrawny form. “Perhaps yours can too, Yu. When you‘re one with the Asura, you fight as a veteran warrior. It does take effort not to swoon in the moment, I admit.”

“Wait, I thought it was the Frame making me move like that,” Yu said.

“It does no such thing,” Ein stated. “Yu, the heat of combat smolders within your very body.”

“I guess…” Yu struggled to find the words. “I guess I do feel lighter on my feet with it on. Like I can do anything. But I don’t know if I like it.”

There were techniques, stances, ways of hurting people in his head that Yu shouldn’t have known. The most violent he had felt before, if you could call it that, was when kicking a soccer ball, but when he was with the Mark III, fighting came to him like it was second nature. Assuming those abilities originated from his own nanomachines, it stood to reason that he didn’t need the suit to pull them off. But that realization only made Yu’s steps feel heavier, and he didn’t know why.

“Well, they look like they’re in good spirits,” Ein remarked.

“Yeah, they do,” said Yu. “Er, in more ways than one. They look drunk.”

Outside the campus gate, on the bustling shopping street, the men had set up tables, chairs, and rolled out picnic sheets all along the road. But it was far too late to be enjoying the cherry blossoms at this time of year.

Dozens of men, young, old, and every age in between reeked of booze. Bottles of shochu liquor and whiskey, beer cans, and canisters of what looked to be homemade umeshu and sake sat just about everywhere there were people gathered. Such rare commodities in their day and age weren’t to be consumed lightly, but today seemed to be a celebration.

Yu and Ein could hear some of the cheers.

“Damn bastard’s back at it!” a man shouted. “Three’s back, baby!”

“Which one o’ yous said he was dead?!” another slurred. “I want my money!”

One man bellowed over the clamor with laughter. “Ain’t gotta worry about no Anomalies anymore!”

Someone else took the lead over the chaos and called out, “To Devicer Three!”

“Japan’s gonna be all right!”

The men raised their drinks before downing them all in a single swig.

Rarer than anything in such dire times, even rarer than their spirits, was good news. The celebration was almost riotous, but the return of their nation’s hero had struck the people with emotions they hadn’t felt in years. While Ein watched with keen curiosity, Yu found the entire affair uncomfortable.

As they walked, they passed by a group of the rejoicing men. Yu felt none of the danger he had felt the day before, mostly on account of the enormous, drunken grins they were flashing Ein’s way.

“I know you!” one called out. “Heard you’re puttin’ in a good word for us boys, eh?”

“Get over here and have a drink!” one offered. “We owe ya one for gettin’ our sorry asses outta this place!”

“We got food! C’mon over!” another hollered.

The truth of Ein’s offer had spread and, as an unsurprising result, become twisted. They had both left their guns behind, and even still they felt completely unthreatened by the suddenly openhearted townsfolk. Ein

turned the drunks down with a polite nod and Yu replied with a forced smile.

They quickly put some distance between themselves and the noise before more unsolicited invitations could find them.

"So stupid," Yu murmured. "Like we don't remember what they did yesterday."

"Be they human or elf, we are all but victims to our nature," said Ein calmly. "The man who lives a sinless life does not exist. We lie, steal, and hurt one another, sometimes even kill one another. But so, too, does the criminal sometimes commit acts of selflessness. Good and evil are simply two sides of the same coin. Or at least, that's what I believe."

Yu was quiet for a moment. "Maybe I should just let it go."

Not even a full day ago, Yu had saved a town of people. Many had died, but many more were alive and well. By Yu's hand. But his mind was heavy with doubts, buzzing with idle thoughts.

What would have happened to Aliya without Natsuki's help?

Didn't Natsuki say these were bad people?

Yu was glad to have saved lives. He truly was. But not all of them were lives he felt particularly compelled to protect. Among them were people he detested, people he couldn't respect, people like the officers and soldiers at Maizuru.

Yu realized where his train of thought was heading and sighed. "I don't think I make a very good hero."

"And I wouldn't make a good judge." They had come to a quiet residential street. Ein stopped in the middle of the road and said, "But what do you say we test my theory?"

Yu turned to her, confused. "What?"

"Let's see how well you fight without the Asura." Ein took a tight fighting stance. "I can spar with you, if you'd like." She held her right fist out towards Yu while she shielded her face with her left.

Yu shook his head. "Not now. I think I want me and Devicer Three to be separate people," he answered. Then his voice quieted. "It makes it…easier."

The slaughter. The carnage. The weapons of mass destruction. It was hard for Yu to come to terms with how easily it all came to him. He justified it as best he could, told himself it was either the Anomalies or him, told himself it was to protect his friends, but still he struggled to feel any sort of pride for the Mark III's strength. Or for the victories it brought.

Perhaps it was guilt. The undeniable truth that, enemy or not, Yu was taking life. Perhaps it was his inability to reconcile that fact that caused him to cage the identity of Devicer Three away from his own. Yu's emotions were jumbled, an incomplete puzzle, and he was missing pieces. And that only disheartened him more.

But Ein looked at him with respect in her eyes. "Interesting. That's a novel idea, Yu. As many of your thoughts are, but this one especially," she

said. “The heroes of my memory were glory-seekers. Doers of mighty feats and great beacons to the world. As the saying goes, ‘ye from afar, hear and tremble. Ye who are near, behold and wonder.’”

“I think I learned that in my classical literature class one time.”

Ein chuckled smugly. “I wanted to sound smart,” she boasted. “What I mean to say is, what you just told me is entirely antithetical to those notions. When I heard those words, Yu, I felt goosebumps.”

“*Why*?” Yu asked. She had to be joking around, trying to cheer him up, but the bright smile on her face was anything but a jest. She stared right at him, and Yu felt himself getting lost in her eyes.

“A masked hero whom no face adorns. I am witnessing the birth of something incomprehensibly incredible,” Ein murmured. She reached out and took Yu’s hand in her own. “Yu. I have never been more certain of anything before in my life. You will be a legend unlike any other.”

Her hands squeezed tight around Yu’s, her strength comforting, her presence reassuring. Yu had no idea how powerful the simple act of being there could be for someone who was hurting. Would that he could let the mood linger.

“I feel like I should tell you that masked heroes are kind of super common in this world,” he said.

Ein’s narrow eyes opened wide. “Really? Well, where have they been hiding?!”

“I mean in like kids’ TV shows and stuff. Movies.”

“Yu, I do not know what those words mean,” Ein stated. “But now is as good a time as any to reiterate that my only purpose for seeking my elvish brethren is to stand by you. Wherever you go, I shall follow. Whatever you do, I will be there to support you. Nothing is more important to me.”

Ein’s unfaltering stare pierced Yu through to his heart. The sincerity in her words affected him deeply, and his eyes grew hot.

“Thanks,” he replied simply. “That… That makes me happy.”

“Though I do find it odd that you’ve yet to be smitten by my advances—I mean, really, I believe I’ve been exceptionally moving—I won’t rush you. Some of us are struck at once by a lightning bolt of love, but I suppose the slow, rolling rainclouds of a romantic drizzle are just as valid. I know you can be quite shy at times, so I’ll wait as long as it takes. Or perhaps you’d prefer I be more aggressive?”

“How could you possibly get *more* aggressive?!” Yu blurted. “Scratch that, don’t wanna know!”

Yu couldn’t put his finger on why, but although he usually preferred to be alone with his thoughts in times of distress, he didn’t find Ein’s antics all that irritating. In fact, he might have even enjoyed them.

Just then, a young man in glasses appeared, walking from the direction of the noisy street.

“Excuse me, Lady Elf,” he said. “I believe this is yours.” He produced an auxiliary droid in the shape of a carpenter bee—a MUV Bumblebee. “My name is Shiba, and I come from Nayuta.”

3

Roughly four hundred people lived in the refugee city off the coast of the Great Kansai Bay. According to Natsuki, about forty or fifty more could be found further inland. About half of them were currently gathered at the shore, a residential street of small, one-story houses where the asphalt had become a deposit for silt and sand being carried by the waves. Some watched the ship depart from the surreal beach while others looked on from the top of roofs. Some with hope. Others with doubt.

“Finally off,” the bespectacled man sighed.

Jurota Shiba stared out at those on the water’s edge from the freighter’s stern as they receded into the distance, Yu and his friends standing with him. It was three in the afternoon and the sun was beginning its descent.

“This took forever,” Yu murmured. “Three whole days of bickering just to work everything out.”

“Everyone wanted a spot, so can’t really blame ’em,” Ijuin replied.

Two hundred were aboard the mid-sized cargo ship, their attendance made possible by the fact that there was no actual cargo to take up space. Most of them were children, the elderly, or the sick. In the absence of any real port, they had boarded by painstakingly sailing a rubber raft back and forth between the shore and the freighter parked out at sea. It had taken a frustrating amount of time.

“At least some people volunteered to stay,” Aliya pointed out.

Natsuki shrugged. “No point blaming them. This isn’t the first time they’ve had their hopes let down.”

“What do you mean?” Aliya asked.

“So, we have a few boats ourselves—repaired some stuff that floated up from who knows where—and we’ve tried to take them out to find help before. Went to Awaji Island and even Shikoku. Wasn’t much we could do without radio, y’know? Didn’t have much luck, though.” Natsuki began to count the grievances on her fingers as she recounted. “The people we found gave us wussy replies and wouldn’t do jack—well, we did force ’em to take a few people. But the locals would be jerks, wouldn’t hand out food, stuff like that. Lots of people ended up coming back.”

Shiba nodded. “That sounds about right,” he said. “The provisional government is pretty much kaput, and what local administration they do have hardly has enough to keep their own people alive.”

“You mean Kyushu’s just as bad as everywhere else?!” Ijuin shouted. Anxiety for his family twisted his voice.

“You said your name was Shiba?” said Ein pointedly. “You seem rather well fed to me.”

“We are better off than the outside, yes,” Shiba admitted. “Benefits of living in a completely self-sustaining floating city. We have plenty of power and food, but that doesn’t mean everything’s perfect.” He exhaled heavily. “It’s hard to send aid when politicians, government officials, and Defense Force dignitaries who escaped from the mainland like to argue. Discussions can go on—*have been* going on for months without a thing getting done.”

“Does Nadal simply allow this to happen?” Ein asked. “You serve him, don’t you?”

Shiba’s smile became less tired and more cheerful. “You know the speaker? That’s right, I work for him. He’s never been one to rock the boat, but boy, when we got your message, things moved fast. Faster than I’ve ever seen. They sent out a boat to collect refugees right away.”

“Because of Ein and Devicer Three,” Aliya said. “If I had to wager a guess, I’d say he was dragging his feet, saving his energy until an opportunity arose. And when he found two more aces for his deck, he pounced on it like the fox he is! That very much sounds like something my uncle would do.”

“You’re his niece, then?” Shiba eyed the proud half-elf with mild surprise. “You definitely think like him.”

“Please, if my uncle is level ninety-nine in being a dastardly snake, I’m hardly level four. Aliya is as pure and innocent as a baby.”

Shiba gave a dry chuckle. “Speaking of names, can I ask which one of you is Devicer Three? It’s something of a matter of security.”

Yu swallowed, when suddenly, Natsuki and Ein both turned to look in the same direction.

“Beasts come,” Ein muttered.

“From up top,” Natsuki said, unfazed. “Let’s hope calamari’s off the menu this time.”

The master markswoman and the superhuman samurai girl locked their keen eyes on an indistinct threat, looming in the distance.

The freighter was near what would have been the mouth of the Yodogawa River in the past. Skyscrapers, modern monoliths of concrete and steel extended from the sunken metropolis below and through the ocean’s surface. Sea level surged and swelled nearabout four stories up. Anything smaller was buried by the waves, their roofs visible between the crests of rippling seawater.

Was Osaka Bay always so beautiful?

Yu had never been to Osaka before, but growing up in Tokyo, he couldn’t remember the waters of such a large city ever looking so clear. But now was no time for retrospection.

“Anomaly identified!” Aliya shouted. “Goblins!”

“About time we came across some o’ those. Wait, they’re riding balloons!” Ijuin hollered. “What are those? Some kinda makeshift air force?!”

Easily over a hundred tiny, child-like devils wearing nothing but loincloths were riding the wind directly towards them. Nothing seemed to be propelling them forward, and the only things suspending them in the air were fabric balloons tied to their backs, but they were approaching fast. As if by magic.

Shiba, the supposed commanding officer, looked frantically back and forth between them and the ship's captain. "We're taking the same route, aren't we?!" he blubbered. "Around the portal-keep?!"

"Around the portal-keep," the Russian man rumbled. "Looks like the wand-wavers are up to no good today. That or they're killing anything that moves now. Either way, doesn't make a difference now, army boy! To arms!"

"Well said," Ein uttered, pointing her Type 89 to the sky.

Pop! A single balloon burst and the goblin fell ungracefully into the ocean.

"Sh-Should we have brought guns, ya think?!" Ijuin stammered.

"I'm going to say yes!" Aliya replied, voice shaking. "We have to get ready to help defend the ship! Yu, we need Devicer Three!"

She and Ijuin sprinted to the door leading into the ship's hold to acquire weapons. Yu breathed deep. He had no choice. No choice but to forget the hesitation, the guilt, the people he would have rather not risked his life to protect. Because there were people who needed him, and they couldn't protect themselves. Children, injured, elderly. And he wanted to save them.

But moments before Yu could armorize, he heard a voice. A song. There were no lyrics to it, but the voice rang out, poignant and stirring. It resonated with Yu's very soul. A fog fell over his mind and he began to shuffle towards the source of the beauteous tones.

"Ichinose!" someone screamed. "You're walking into the ocean, man!"

"Magic detected! Something is casting the Dazing Melody curse!"

"Be strong, Yu!" another shouted at him. "Do not let the kinnara overtake you!"

Yu could hear his friends warning him, but he did not understand why. He came up to the ship's railing and leaned his languid body against it. All around him were other passengers mimicking the exact same mindless movements.

Above them, the goblins pulled arrows from the quivers on their waists and nocked their bows.

"Get behind something!" Shiba hastily commanded at last.

The goblins fired on the ship all at once. A storm of arrows hummed through the air, striking the deck at pure random like droplets of rain. Many people had emerged to defend themselves against the enemy, and as they took aim, those unlucky enough to be in the monsters' line of fire quickly fell, foaming at the mouth.

"They're poisoned!" Ein shouted. "The arrowheads are coated in toxin!"

A bluish liquid covered the tips of the arrows scattered about the deck. Before long, Ein was joined by sailors, men from the town, and even women wielding shotguns and rifles. They opened fire on the airborne goblins, but it was too little too late. The Anomalies began to descend and alighted onto the ship.

Natsuki unsheathed her monomolecular blade with delight, her sleeves fluttering in the wind. “My turn!”

The girl flew into the fray.

At the gunwale, Yu pressed his body harder against the rail. As the last of his strength slipped away, he swung over and fell headfirst. Down into the ocean below.

4

April third. Yu Ichinose should have been starting school soon. He should have been in his third year of middle school. What was he doing here, sinking to the bottom of Osaka Bay? Rather, it was the Great Kansai Bay now, wasn’t it?

Where was he? He had never been here before. Where had his home in Kita ward gone?

He had always lived at home. Even after being transferred to a nanotechnology research facility under Defense Force requisition with Aliya and Ijuin. He would commute every day.

Every day, except that day.

He had been staying at Yokota Air Base in Tama. Not far from Tokyo, but away from the twenty-three main wards. Something about helping conduct research. And it was during one such round of experiments that the first earthquake hit. Many more would follow.

That day, portal-keeps materialized above the entire Tokyo Metropolitan Area.

The ground never stopped shaking. The earth surged with a violent rage that could never be quelled. And as it did, the Anomalies decapitated Japan’s government and military. Then the rain came. Then the wind. Then the floods.

Yu only returned home once, when it was over. He was helping the Force with rescue efforts. But by then, the entirety of central Tokyo was already underwater. And Yu’s childhood home was just one out of the many landmarks of the new suburban seafloor. He remembered passing over its roof aboard a rubber raft—and then just as quickly leaving it behind.

They never found the bodies. But no matter how long he waited, Yu never heard from his family like Ijuin had. There was nothing from his parents. Nothing from his sister. Nothing from any of his relatives at all. And so things were. And so time passed.

I’m not special, Yu thought. We all got left behind. We’re all that’s left.

Yu felt the road against his back. The ocean had covered much of downtown Osaka in a bed of soil and sand. A creature was gripping his foot.

The Anomaly that had dragged him down to this watery grave appeared to be a mermaid, with the alluring torso of a naked woman and the peculiar lower half of a fish. Scales dotted its dark blue skin.

What were they called again? Yu pondered calmly. Sirens? Or is this really a mermaid I'm seeing?

The gills on its neck pulsated as it continued to sing its song. Yu listened to the meaningless melody, its notes unimpeded by the water around them, and a great melancholy overcame him. One so painful that the agony of suffocation seemed utterly unimportant.

Yu turned his eyes up listlessly. The sun glittered on the water's surface. How sad it was. Not like here. Where he lay was far more comfortable. Perhaps he would even get to see his family again.

Other sirens held victims down all over the bay's floor. Slowly, the air began to leave their lungs and they started to drown. With blissful smiles on their faces.

Yu was about to join them in sublime surrender, when he heard the edge of a sharp and powerful voice.

"Yu! Do not heed the fae's call!"

He could have sworn it was Ein's, but like the waves rippling above, it passed, and he continued to gaze at the shimmering light.

But something startled him awake.

"*Ein!*" Yu replied telepathically. "*What are you doing?!*"

The Replicant girl was swimming down towards him, completely clothed and unarmed. She moved through the water with grace and skill.

Pain returning to his senses, Yu choked and inhaled a little seawater. He wouldn't last long with the siren holding his legs.

The Shroud! he thought.

The ring in Yu's palm glowed, and from it flowed adaptive nanofactors, solidifying into a yellow cloth. The scarf wrapped itself around the siren's head and across its slender neck, then after a gruesome *crack*, the monster's song ceased. The creature, its spine having been snapped like a twig, went limp.

Ein drifted towards Yu, and in a single, almost transient instant, she drew her face closer and pressed her lips against his.

Yu stared at her blankly, the thoughts being transmitted to Ein a mess of stutters.

She winked. "I thought this was how you humans lifted evil witches' curses."

As devilishly charming as she was, Yu could hold his breath no longer. The black and gold nano-armor plated itself over his body.

On the ship, a fierce battle of swashbuckling proportions was underway. The goblins had cut the tethers to their balloons and boarded, armed with small axes and swords hanging from sashes around their waists. The humans faced the wildly slashing mob with knives, billhooks, spades, and sidearms. Further back, some sniped at the monsters from afar, while others fired their shotguns madly, mauling friend and foe alike.

Natsuki had already felled over a dozen of the creatures.

"Stick close, youngins," she said.

"I'm sorry!" blubbered Ijuin. "We're really holdin' ya back here!"

"I saw Ein dive into the ocean after Yu!" Aliya cried. "You don't think they both drowned, do you?!"

Natsuki, with the two young middle schoolers at her back, gently swayed her monomolecular blade at three goblins who seemed ready to pounce. They were cornered. Ijuin shakily aimed a 9mm handgun with unsteady hands and Aliya cradled a submachine gun of the same caliber in her arms. The half-elf turned to peer timidly over the edge—and gasped.

A small whirlpool was beginning to swirl on the surface of the ocean. She could feel it in her nanofactors. The Gospel of the Asura Frame's awakening.

—Oh, Traveler. Heed me, oh Traveler,
—Wanderer of the realm and distances vast,
—Rejoice, oh Siddha. The awakening has begun.

The whirlpool swelled to a massive size, until from the center of the spiral soared Devicer Three, donned in the Mark III. In his arms was the enchanting Replicant girl.

Ein was dripping wet, but otherwise unharmed in the hands of her knight.

"Wanna explain that kiss now?!" Yu demanded.

"I believe I already did," Ein retorted. "Isn't it exciting? We've reached a whole new level of our relationship to explore!"

"Yeah, right! That one did *not* count!"

"Are you implying there will be another?" she quipped back. "I like this new aggressive side of yours, Yu!"

"Okay, you're doing this on purpose," he moaned.

The Mark III pirouetted into the clouds, a beautiful, sprightly maiden in its arms. The sight was painting-worthy, save for the subjects' bickering. It was through that trivial banter, though, that Yu felt the siren's gloom fade from his mind.

The Frame ejected its nanofactors and the machines took new forms—that of the MUV Clay-Doll. The puppets were only about a meter tall and had each been crafted with simple, exaggerated features—stumpy limbs, with an oversized head and great big eyes. Spiral patterns decorated their bodies along the glossy gray finish.

"Now, Yu! Release them!" Ein called.

"It's time, Mark III!" Yu raised his voice. "By the name of Rudra!"

The sixteen puppet droids moved out, each being powered by fifty gigajoules of energy from their father Frame and propelled by anti-gravity lifters. Straight down to the ship.

Screams, gunshots, and the sound of clashing metal filled the air of the cargo freighter's deck.

Shiba—the envoy from Nayuta—fell backwards before a bloodthirsty goblin. The man cowered feebly, holding his hands above his head as the monster raised its axe.

"I *told* you I was a pencil pusher!" he sniveled.

But then, a doll-like droid descended, flying with uncanny fluidity, and took the strike in the man's place. The attack let out an ear-splitting whine against the metal as it repelled the axe.

The droid's chest was dotted with tiny holes.

They were, in fact, guns.

The droid's machine guns crackled as bullet after bullet riddled the goblin with holes of its own.

"There we are," Shiba sighed, still flat on his rear. He looked up. "The King of the Storm is on his throne."

Devicer Three overlooked the realm below with an imposing calm, and the peculiar elf rested in his embrace. A golden sheen emanated from the dusk armor in the sun's light. In the presence of such awesome countenance, the humans found renewed strength. A fire was lit in them, and they would not let the droids outshine their valor.

At long last, their hero was back.

The doll droids were massacring goblins all over the deck with a myriad of weapons. Machine guns in their chests, high-voltage currents emitted from their bodies, paralyzing stun guns. The meager gremlins never stood a chance.

There were those who didn't need the help, though. Namely Natsuki Hatano. Three goblins faltered in her presence, distracted by the droids' arrival, and that was their last mistake. A single glide of the blade along each of their bodies was enough to reap their lives.

“Those things from Yu?” she asked. “Didn’t know he played with dolls.”

“*It’s me*,” Devicer Three’s voice replied. “*Natsuki, I need you to secure the deck.*” Yu directed the transmission to his friends as well. “*Ijuin, can you help Aliya guide the droids?*”

“Sure, but what about you?” Ijuin said.

“I…think he’s going to deal with that,” said Aliya, pointing to the sky. There, an amber aurora billowed—a manifestation of another world, an incarnation of morbid beauty.

Natsuki narrowed her eyes at the ocean. “They don’t usually come this close,” she murmured. “Yu, can you guys really handle that?”

“We have to,” said Yu. “Ein and I will draw their attention while you all clear away the goblins and get to Nayuta.”

“*We will meet you there shortly*,” Ein said. Her resolute tone did not leave room for argument.

Terrifyingly close to the freighter was an ethereal fortress—a newly materialized portal-keep. The crystal palace rested forebodingly on its lotus pedestal atop the waves.

The old world stood above the embattled waters of Osaka Bay. Monuments to a lost megalopolis, growing from the ocean. Apartment complexes, hotels, even a ferris wheel and the spires of a castle that once landmarked a sprawling theme park.

Yu landed on one of the buildings, carefully letting Ein down. His screen read an altitude of 135 meters. The two stared out at the portal-keep just 5 kilometers southwest of their position—a palace as azure as the ocean, floating unhindered by the current. By all accounts, it was supposed to be further west of here, but the oddly colored aurora overhead was proof enough of the enemy’s ill intentions.

“Hm,” Ein breathed. “It seems they have more forces.”

Reptilian creatures with a single pair of hind legs and wings for arms emerged. They were barely half the size of the dragon at Maizuru, but still on a scale akin to a ferocious dinosaur. Wyverns. And a flock of twenty-seven had taken flight. Alongside them was a smaller brood. The Cretaceous period relics, with their pteranodon-esque crested heads and pointed beaks, numbered four hundred and five exactly. All were heading straight for Yu and Ein.

“I believe we’ve done our job of drawing their attention,” Ein said.

“Should we make more droids?” Yu asked.

“You can’t,” Aliya’s voice quickly refuted. “The Mark III currently has two billion nanomachines on board. You’ll never be able to put up a fight with that.”

Yu inclined his head in thought. “That sounds like a lot to me.”

“It takes one-point-two billion alone to form the Frame itself.”

Ijuin groaned. “This is why we needta get that thing looked at!” he said, frustrated.

“It ain’t so easy being the super hero, huh?” Natsuki teased. “Your dolls are helping out, though. Things are under control here.”

Yu gave his partner a knowing glance. He had once rejected the weapon despite Ein’s suggestion, fearful of what it might do. But there was little choice in the matter this time.

Ein nodded. “There appears to be only one option left to us,” she said. “Let us throw wide the gates of hell.”

Yu nodded back. “What was its name?”

“The Doomsday Book. There are several chapters to choose from, but I say we begin with the first.”

`[System Now Booting Doomsday Book “VIDYA-MANTRA RUDRA1”]`

Ein closed her eyes and focused her mind, her being, and as Yu watched her, windows and system text obstructed his vision, overlapping the girl before him.

She parted her shapely lips and spoke the Gospel,

—This world is but a shadow. This existence, but a bolt in fog.

—Witness it not with eyes to see.

—Ascend and know that all is fleeting. Learn and suffer life as it becomes death.

Every word seemed to trickle towards Yu, stark and cold, and the superconductive Prayer Wheel in the Mark III’s lower abdomen began to spin. Faster. Faster. The generator whirred at impossible speeds, and then, like before, a cacophony of voices chorused from it.

“Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha! Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha!”

Above, where the clouds heaved, the winds were becoming gales, and gales became cyclones.

“What is that?!” Yu cried.

“The beast of the wind. The servant of storms. This,” said Ein, “is the first of Rudra’s mighty knights!”

Ein’s descriptions were appropriate. What they bore witness to was indeed a beast—a tempest of seemingly twelve, perhaps even thirteen meters in length, in the vague, vaporous figure of a panther. Its insubstantial form, a collection of wisps like that of a genie, bounded through the sky in a figure eight, stirring the winds into a raucous squall.

It truly was a beast of wind.

“It’s almost like the elementals Anomalies can summon,” Yu murmured, eyes wide.

“The concept is similar, but their respective capabilities are incomparable,” said Ein. “The beast of the wind can move the heavens, call rain, and conjure lightning. It is the harbinger of deluge and storm.”

“The Doomsday Book is a weather weapon?” Ijuin commented. “No freakin’ way!”

Amidst the roaring gales, Yu felt the Replicant princess's gaze on him. He knew how this was going to end.

"Rudra," he said. "Do it."

The wheel at his waist continued to turn, until it could turn no quicker, and the chorus reached its crescendo. The windbeast pounced at the enemy forces. But there were no cracks of lightning, no whipping gales. As the beast came upon the flying monsters, the Anomalies simply fell dead.

And then there was silence. Horrible silence.

The wyverns and pteranodons, the hundreds of Anomalies plummeted. Every single last one. All of them. Slain in an instant.

"That's it?!" Natsuki shouted. "You got poison gas in that thing or something?"

"No. It didn't 'poison' anything," Yu muttered. "It took. The King of the Storm rules the skies. The air. It controls the atmosphere."

"Mom said once that the Mark III can suck virtually all the oxygen out of the air and suffocate people," Aliya explained. "But I had no idea it could be done on such a massive scale."

"Think I get why you didn't wanna use that around people," Ijuin said.

To everyone except the headlong samurai girl, the events that had just unfolded were awe-inspiring. The three middle schoolers had come to the collective realization that they were in possession of not just any weapon. But a weapon of unbridled mass destruction. A weapon meant to take life indiscriminately.

Yu shook his head and forced the thoughts away. "We've still got that keep to deal with," he said. "Ein, we need a droid!"

"Right away!" she replied.

Adaptive nanofactors dispersed and coalesced into a MUV Puppeteer. The levitating titan's limb curled into a fist and took aim.

Yu thrust his own fist out and commanded, "Turn that pretty castle into rubble!"

At once, the arm droid fired towards the waterborne palace with all the speed and precision of a missile, and more. But moments before making contact, the droid came to an immediate and abrupt stop.

"I'm detecting defense magic in play! Projectile Protection!" Aliya reported.

"Man!" said Ijuin. "They sure love that one, don't they?"

"Careful, Yu!" Natsuki warned. "I don't think they're gonna stay defensive for long!"

The giant's arm, still lingering in front of the castle, suddenly started to crumble away. At first it was fine particles of dust, but soon the droid began to lose its structure.

"How can Disintegrate work on something that big?" Aliya grit her teeth. "That's not fair!"

A high-pitched alarm sounded in Yu's ears. He looked down, but too late to notice the silver rope that had coiled around the Mark III's leg.

“Yu! A spell rope!” Ein had no more time to blurt out those words than she did to hurl herself onto Yu.

The next moment, the two were in the air, pulled along by some unseen force controlling the rope. Its other end led straight to the phantom keep beneath the bewitching amber aurora, and that was precisely where Devicer Three and the Replicant girl were being drawn to.

“I can’t break it!” Yu shouted.

“No amount of strength can!” Ein said. “The spell is too strong!”

She held fast onto Yu, refusing to let themselves become separated. It was too late for the nano-suit to attempt to nullify such powerful magic, so Yu clung to Ein just as tightly.

A mere few seconds later, the Mark III landed hard against the ground, and they found themselves as ants before a towering portal-keep.

5

The courtyard upon the lotus pedestal was unlike the resplendent and garishly majestic palace it led to. The earth was bare, flat, and unadorned with so much as a single blade of grass or flower.

“You’d think they would do a little more landscaping for a place like this,” Yu remarked.

“No, I don’t think so,” said Ein. “The ground is hard and compact. This is not for decoration. The soldiers gather here. Cavalry. Monsters and fae. The function of this fortress is strictly military.”

The Mark III had absorbed most of the impact, and Ein was unhurt. They stood up and faced the translucent, blue palace. A staircase extended from the castle’s entrance down to the earthen courtyard, as crystalline and lustrous as the keep itself. A girl emerged at the top. A girl riding on the back of a ferocious carnivore. And together they began to descend.

Yu blinked. “Is that a *lion*?”

The girl looked frail, willowy, and almost certainly younger than even Aliya. The noble lion carrying her took each step carefully and with purposeful grace, as a steward would escort his lady. One would think she was as precious and valuable as delicate porcelain. The girl dangled both legs off one side of the beast, a haughty grin adorning her face. She was swathed in a long, rippling fabric of mostly white and embellished with floral embroidery. It resembled the traditional sari garments of India.

The lion approached and turned to the side, allowing Yu and the girl to meet face-to-face.

“Well met, Vajra One, and welcome to my radiant abode,” she said. “I am Scullchance of the Pride, the keeper and Dharva of this hold!”

Her voice was a sword, and Yu froze, as if the blade had been placed to his neck. He couldn’t believe it. The enemy was here, right in front of him, and communicating in perfect Japanese.

“How are you—”

“Speaking to you?” the girl interrupted. She let out a scornful and condescending laugh. “Please, you primitives are hardly as enlightened as you’d like to believe. Tell me, have you any understanding of bodhi?” She did not wait for an answer. “I thought not. Your tongue is a terribly simple one—I find it lacking in poeticism—but not to worry. For better or worse, I have assimilated it. I would not ask, nor expect you to engage in the *impossible* task of comprehending the words of Param.”

“Don’t dwell on it,” Ein told Yu. “The Dharva—the ones you call the archmages—rival even the sages in terms of intellect.”

“Intellect,” Scullchance repeated. “Yes, I do suppose your people would fall on the ‘chic’ side of sentience, shall we say.” The girl spoke as if deliberately vaunting her mastery of all elements of the language, even slang. She sneered. “But your time has passed and your mantras are silenced. You are nothing to the keepers. You *should have been* nothing. And yet, what do I see here?”

The girl glowered at Ein, a look filled with enough vitriol to make the lion beneath her cower. “What do I see, but the very image of Her late Majesty,” Scullchance said. “Queen Liricamaja, dynastic sovereign of one of the four—the land of tempests, Vibhram’ladri. You look just like her when she was young, girl. If her royal blood lives on,” she looked at Yu, “then it is small wonder that you have borne witness to true vajra.”

A chill ran down Yu’s spine, a rush of pure terror. Terror more potent, more viscerally instinctual than anything he had ever felt. Not from the golden-maned king of the beasts. Not even from the Anomalies he had struck down.

“Warrior of black and gold,” the girl called. “Agent of vajra and wielder of the Shroud. Awakener of the Wheel of Orison. I deem you a worthy opponent of the Chosen!”

Yu’s breath caught in his throat as he witnessed the impossible. Scullchance pulled one leg over to sit astride the lion, when her form began to morph and change, coalescing into the animal’s very body until her entire lower half became one with the beast. When the monstrous chimera finished its transformation, an equally foul axe materialized in the dainty girl’s hand. The beautiful half of the creation swung the weapon with ease.

“State your name,” she demanded. “The Lioness would know her prey.”

“I am…” Yu pried the words from his lips, dredging out the title he had refused to accept for so long, and responded, “Devicer Three.”

Scullchance cackled. “How utterly repulsive!” she roared. “But fitting enough for your tombstone!”

The archmage brought down her axe as Yu crossed his arms and caught the blow.

“Ein, get back!” he shouted. “Keep an eye out for reinforcements!”

“You insult me,” Scullchance spat. “You think *I* would share the battlefield with *fodder*? Don’t make me laugh!”

“Yu, this is no ordinary foe!” Ein said. “She means to duel you!”

Ein quickly sprung away from the fighting, and the half-girl, half-lion archmage continued to thrash her weapon against the ADAMAS armor. Blow after devastating blow, a sharp and metallic whine rang out, slowly but surely pushing the Mark III further back.

"No way," said Yu. "She's stronger?!" Never had he been matched in raw power. Yet, somehow, Scullchance was overwhelming the Asura Frame —a machine capable of pumping out over five hundred thousand horsepower. "You can't be telling me mages can fight *normally* too!"

"If vajra be your shield, then I need only cleave it with demonic might!" Scullchance howled. "Come, fellow beholder of vajra! Show me your power!" The archmage pointed her free hand at Yu. "Crumble! Fall to darkness! Thy legs, fail! Thy arms, rot! Burn to ash!"

The incantations turned to magic and at once assailed Yu's body. First, the Mark III glowed and creaked beneath its own weight. Yu broke into a cold sweat and fought to keep himself from heaving. Then, his vision went dark, and a swipe from the archmage's axe across his helmet jerked his head violently to the side. His legs quivered, struggling to retain their quickly draining strength, and he only barely managed to stay standing when he felt the axe crash into his gut. An instant later, just as Yu took note of a cramping itch crawling up his arms, the Frame went up in flames. Searing agony boiled him alive.

Yu shrieked and bounded away. The Frame's anti-magic shell at last dispelled the magic assaulting him, snuffing out the fire and returning his senses to normal. Only then did the Mark III's sensors identify the spells: Disintegrate, Words of Power: Blind, Words of Power: Paralyze, Perish, and Incinerate. Yu felt immensely vulnerable without Aliya's much more timely reports.

But they're not here, Yu thought. Aliya and Ijuin are outside commlink range.

All the numbers and screens and windows were only getting in his way. The only thing he wanted to focus on was the enemy right in front of him. But then, a certain data report caught his eye. All the spells he had just endured were ranked at level-A intensity. The same as the dragon's fire breath. And Scullchance had unleashed five in the span of a few seconds.

"Consider that a courtesy introduction," said the archmage, smiling in terrific glee. "We've only just begun."

Yu was silent. He knew that she wasn't bluffing.

"Yu," came a transmission from his one and only ally, "our only chance at defeating her is the Doomsday Book. I can ready chapter three if you'll allow me."

"*You're right,*" Yu replied in his mind. "*But...*"

"Keen as always," said Ein. "Yes, it will take time to prepare."

"And that's where I come in."

Yu could sense the kind of weapon "chapter three" would be upon hearing its name. But there was no time for hesitation.

“Can you do it?” Ein asked.

“I’ll manage,” Yu said. “Don’t worry. I’m used to this.”

“Oh?”

“Weak doesn’t mean helpless,” he said. “We took a few good beatings back at Maizuru. Honestly, it’s felt pretty weird lately, being so untouchable.”

Those days at Maizuru already felt like distant memories. It hadn’t even been two weeks since the camp’s destruction, and so much had changed. There was no more daily bullying, no more violence at the hands of Takeda or his military cronies. But there was the anger. The resentment. The despair. The hopelessness. It was all there. As clear as day.

And yet, Yu owed his life to the soldier.

Yu grit his teeth against the tightness in his chest.

“Dance with me, boy!” Scullchance bellowed. “Come and experience me!”

“What?!”

All of a sudden, the archmage was gone. The Mark III’s sensors were picking up nothing. There were few things more crippling in a fight than losing sight of one’s opponent during a duel, and Yu knew it. Just as he was about to lose his head, he felt the scarf around his neck stir.

The Holy Shroud’s appendages knocked away the axe arcing towards Yu’s back.

“You’ve tamed the sacred sarira well!” Scullchance’s macabre weapon had been swiftly negated, even without Yu’s conscious will. The archmage tittered. “The Holy Shroud. Aerocite. The Wheel of Orison. Adamas, the aegis of sand. So many treasures of the old royalty I had thought put to waste by fools. But oh, how wrong I was! Vajra One, you have come to possess a magnum opus all new!”

“This thing’s that special to them?” Yu muttered.

He faced his opponent once more. Reaching up to the yellow cloth, Yu tore a piece off with one hand, then did the same with the other. “Protect me,” he said. “That’s all I ask.”

The fabric expanded in his grip, spiraling up and enfolding each of the Mark III’s arms. Magical runes and crests appeared along the cloth. Yu held up his bound limbs and crossed them together again, hardened his guard, and took a firm step towards his enemy. He was scared. But he turned that fear into courage and approached.

A sadistic smirk spread across Scullchance’s face. “I applaud your bravery, boy. However foolhardy. Burst! Face thunderous judgment! Thy blood, boil upon the earth! Let come the curse of winter’s chill!”

More A-level spells erupted from the archmage, one after the other. The feline lower half opened its jaws and expelled a shock wave of electricity. Moments later, Yu’s arteries, veins, and every single capillary within his body burned as his blood very literally felt near to boiling, before a frigid cold ran over him, nearly stopping his heart. And it would have if not for the

anti-magic shell or the runes radiating along the Holy Shroud—which a message stated were providing thirty-two percent greater magic nullification.

Even as this was happening, Scullchance did not relent and flailed her battle-axe endlessly. The Holy Shroud's limbs moved to block as many blows as it could, but the half-lion girl was viciously savage, and Yu endured strike after strike to his crossed arms. Never fighting back.

"You put on an entertaining act, Vajra One!"

"At least one of us is having fun!" Yu shot back.

Really, as far as Yu was concerned, actually taking hits was optional. The trick was to loosen up, relax at the moment of impact, and bend with it. Never take it head on. All the better if the shock blew him away. That was how to survive. That was how the weak fought back. *Survive*. Pliably. Stubbornly. Persistently.

"Let flame take thee! Crumble! Fall and await the reaper! Come frigid wind and paint the snow with thy entrails!"

Fire. Axe. Nausea. Axe. Blight. Axe. Cold. Axe.

Scullchance lent herself to pure and cruel sadistic wont, flogging and casting spells that would have decimated an entire battalion of Defense Force soldiers—from point blank. Over and over. It was like a Russian roulette of fear. At any moment, any one of the flurry of attacks could break his guard and smear his brains on the floor. It was all Yu could do to keep his thoughts on less gruesome things.

If this were the World Cup, these guys would be Brazil or Argentina, Yu thought, turning his mind to soccer, and I'm the newcomer. Iceland, or maybe Panama. I'm up against the big leagues. And if I want to make this game even remotely close, I need to be stubborn and wait for my chance!

Yu had passed his test and made the team. He'd watched the pros from the bottom up, the way the brightest athletes in the European league played and crawled their ways to the top, so he wasn't kidding himself. He knew just how unrealistic an underdog's chances were. A clutch was one in a million.

But anything could happen on the field.

It took patience. Tenacity. The iron will to wait, and wait, and wait for the right moment. And the smarts to know when and how to finally play your trump card.

Scullchance frowned. "You. What are you planning?"

She looked up and her mouth dropped. The amber aurora was gone. Veiled behind dark, rolling thunderclouds. Ein had bid the windbeast to gather them, but their ace in the hole was at risk of being compromised. Yu had to do something.

And then he had an idea.

"Don't need droids to do this!" he shouted.

"Do *what*?" the archmage demanded.

The Mark III's arms detached, their job as shields complete, and shot towards Scullchance's bemused expression. Soaring as a droid might with the help of anti-gravity lifters, the arms went straight for the mage's neck, hands outstretched. Yu's arms were made bare from the shoulders down.

"Sorry, Mark III!" Yu said.

"You—"

Directly in front of the half-lion girl's exposed neck, the arms self-destructed. Her body glowed with defensive magic, and when the smoke cleared, not a single injury marred her pretty skin, or her bloodthirsty grin. But it bought some time, and that was what mattered.

Yu took flight and soared over to Ein.

"That was a clever trick, Yu!" she said. "It's almost time!"

"Hang on tight!"

Yu clutched the Replicant girl and flew straight up, bidding a more bitter than sweet farewell to the crystal palace.

—The mortal knows not what he does. The mortal knows not of the flames of hell.

—The mortal knows not of good and evil, nor of the atrocities he commits.

—The mortal is bound by illusory chains of proud ideology, and wherefore might he be freed.

Ein incanted the Gospel, and the cumulus clouds hanging over the aurora began to rumble. Lightning cracked and flared in the sky, when a single bolt snaked down and smote the palace with a great crackle. The god of thunder's forces took to arms at the signal, and forks of electricity stormed from the swirling masses, laying siege to the crystalline castle.

The sky was alive with flashes and pealing claps of thunder. The first strikes blew the keep's quartz walls to pieces, and it was seeming like the enemy fortress would last only a few moments more, until a spell enveloped the entire palace. Glowing, runic circles appeared all around the palace, covering it like a great tent curtain and negating the electric downpour.

Yu zoomed in with the Mark III's scope. "Looks like that mage has her hands full," he said.

"The Doomsday Book is not a power one can do away with easily," said Ein. "Let's make our escape while we can."

Overlaying the stormy palace, in Yu's direct line of sight, was a window displaying a close-up of Scullchance. She was looking right at him, the rage in her glower undisguised. She must have known that Yu was watching her, but she never stopped moving her lips. Reciting an incantation, perhaps. It seemed that even for a master like her, there were rules she could not disobey.

Yu took a look at one of the other displays and immediately felt his stomach churn. "Whoa. It says the magic protecting the castle is level SS."

Ein was right. Yu had lost the Frame's arms and now was their chance to escape. He set a course for the floating settlement.

The Holy Shroud's appendages held onto Ein. As slender as she was, Yu wasn't confident in his ability to carry an entire human being in his arms without nano-assisted strength.

"What— Wait, what's going on?"

"Yu, the Asura is losing power!" Ein shouted.

The great blue of the Great Kansai Bay was growing closer. Yu panicked.

"Why? How?" he spluttered. "Did I burn it all?"

"You did use the Doomsday Book twice and eliminate copious amounts of magic," said Ein. "Also, please tell me you remember Ijuin's warning."

"Oh. Right."

Yu wasn't supposed to stay armorized for long. Ten, twenty minutes at a time? Sure. But any longer…

Yu checked the Frame's uptime. Thirty-nine minutes and twenty-two seconds. Certainly not very long, but clearly long enough for Ein's admonishment to be exceedingly justified.

"Wait, then does that mean…" The world started to turn around Yu. "Does that mean I'm in trouble?"

"Yu!" Ein cried. "Yu! Get a hold of yourself!"

The world turned, and Yu's vision began to blur. The world turned until the bay was up and the sky was down. Yu fell, Ein in his arms, unaware if they had even made it out to Wakayama.

6

"How the greatest of heroes fall from grace."

Quldald of the Whirlwind—keeper of the portal on the Maizuru front—watched the scene unfold with eager interest. He had come all this way upon the winds, to the skies above the Great Kansai Bay, to observe the unknown Earthling champion do battle with Scullchance, and he now watched as Devicer Three and the princess of old blood plunged into the sea.

"Well, who am I to deny a fruit so ripe for the picking?"

The man radiated a handsome and whimsical curiosity. He waved his staff and called upon a familiar, bidding it to gather his new guests. Visitors were always a happy occasion, even if unexpected.

After all, what was the wind if not unpredictable?

Quldald the Chosen Dharva smiled a dapper smile. A mild and calm gesture, no more profound than the look of a gentleman about to enjoy a stroll after a long day of rain.

EXPLICATIONS

| AVALO AND THE ASTRAL LIBRARY |

Aliya: Apparently, a lot of the Asura Frames from the Mark V onward were developed with unique, specialized purposes in mind. I’m not familiar with the details, but mom told me about the Mark IX once.

Ein: Ah, the guardian of the Astral Library.

Yu: Astral... Like space. That’s the data archive on that satellite that backs up the Mark III, right?

Ijuin: Avalo! The one in geostationary orbit above the equator. It’s where the Gospel Code’s saved!

Aliya: Some say it’s more crucial to our survival than any outpost on Earth. And Devicer Nine’s the one who protects and conducts maintenance on it. The Mark IX’s particularly special because most of its combat abilities were created for fighting in a vacuum with zero gravity.

| ADAMAS NANOMACHINES, ANTIGRAVITY LIFTERS, AND THE PRAYER WHEEL |

Aliya: They might sound like fancy sci-fi gadgets, but they’re all rare artifacts created by magic in the other world. That’s why they blow Earth’s technology totally out of the water.

Ijuin: Yeah, the Mark III can do some crazy stuff. I dunno what to call it *but* magic.

Yu: Like the...what was it called? The Doomsday Book? I still haven’t used chapter one.

Ein: Chapter one: Vacuous Oblivion. Chapter three: Lightning Death. Rest assured, chapter two lives up to its neighbors.

Yu: I hope we never have to use it.

Ein: But the reality is, Yu, that the Doomsday Book may be our greatest weapon against our enemy. The Chosen Dharva, keepers of the spectral fortresses, are not to be underestimated.

Yu: Urgh... You're talking about the archmages, aren't you?

Aliya: An elite force, composed of the greatest mages *literally* chosen from a fae people altogether different from the elves.

Ijuin: Well, who chose 'em in the first place?

Ein: Now *that* is a long story. Perhaps I'll tell it to you one day. When the time is right.

Afterword

Once upon a time, an author was told by an editor at MF Bunko J, “We’re thinking about doing something with a Shin Godzilla vibe.”

“Boy, no way *that’ll* flop in today’s industry,” said the author.

“That’s why we need a trendy hook. Say, isekai,” said the editor. “Instead of Godzilla, there’s an empire invading from another world. Problem is all of our authors keep running away every time we run the idea by them.”

“Yeah, because it sounds like an absolute mess of a setting.”

Yes. I, too, tried to pull a runner. But with a little more grace. And so I proposed my own addition to the cursed book pitch, something as cursed as it was unapologetically niche and exceedingly specific.

“So, what if the setting was a ruined Japanese archipelago, like, half of it’s underwater. And a bunch of scientists and monks of Esoteric Buddhism, like straight out of Ura-Koya, escape to Mount Hiei or Koya or something, where they develop a super cyborg hero hybrid of science and magic! And it’s a big, magical, cyberpunk action fest.”

“Yeah, that sounds good. Go with that.”

“What.”

And so here we are. I’ve found myself at the helm of a Frankenstein novel pitch. It was quite a journey ironing out the story to its current form, and I initially intended it to be a balls-to-the-wall, non-stop-action, superhero-meets-fantasy sort of narrative, with one crazy set piece after the next. But given the way it *actually* turned out, it’s hard to say the state of the world, the pandemic, the variants and whatnot, didn’t color things a little.

I only hope that you find a little respite from these troubled times here in the pages of this book.

Anyway, that makes volume one of this brand new series. As of this writing, the manuscript for volume two has already been completed, so look forward to that next month. I hope to see you there.

01
Project Rebirth
FANTASY INBOUND
JOE TAKEDUKI
《ILLUST.》 SHIRABII

Asura-Type Exo-Frame MarkIII

CHARACTERS

Character bios

NAME

Natsuki Hatano

DATA

An extraordinarily strong and talented girl with a katana who has a knack for flashy entrances.

"Natsuki Hatano. Seventeen. Ex-high schooler. Nice to meetcha."

All PRAJNA Running System Now Booting.

NAME

Yu Ichinose

DATA

A boy assigned to a nanotech research facility for his aptitude for nanomachines, as part of the nationwide initiative. It's there where he finds himself entangled with the Asura Frame, and the title of a lost hero.

"So I just put it on, yeah?"

Mantra Server Startup Complete.

NAME

Chloe Todo

DATA

Aliya's mother and special advisor on Exo-Frame research for the Defense Force.

"Through time and ages, across worlds and countless revolutions of the wheel of life you found the princess. It cannot be a coincidence."

Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha...

"Stop treating me like a kid!"

NAME

Aliya Todo

DATA

A young half-elf who assists her mother with experiments regarding Mark III.

Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha...

"What do they call the one who is to share my destiny?"

NAME

Ein

DATA

A so-called Replicant girl, slumbering within a sleeper pod. She seems to wield the key to waking the Mark III, as well as an immense admiration for Yu.

"You're thinking of Device Three's A-Type Exo-Frame! I've got the limited-edition collector's figure, man!"

NAME

Takamaru Ijuin

DATA

A decidedly unsporty middle schooler who, like Yu, was sent to a research facility for a his nano-fitness. Aliya likes to jab at the unlikely pair by calling them "the dynamic duo."

Bonus Translator's Notes

Hello, reader! I'm Matthew Jackson, the translator of the book you just finished. But that's a mouthful, so you can call me Matt, or even by my online handle, RoTsun, if you're feeling spiffy. However, if you *didn't* just finish reading this book, I'm gonna have to stop you right there and make sure you didn't fly all the way back here by accident. What we're about to get into will include spoilers, so as long as you're aware of that...

Good? Great.

Now, I don't want to ramble for too long before getting to the juicy bits you're actually here to read, so I'll keep the preamble as short as possible.

Fantasy Inbound is a light novel series heavy with East Asian imagery, symbolism, and allusion, primarily in the way of Buddhist and Hindu concepts and mythology. Those familiar with Joe Takeduki's other work may already be aware that this is pretty much par for the course with him, but for those of you who aren't (like me, hey, how's it going), just know that this is not the author's first time taking inspiration from these cultures. And where that makes my job difficult is the fact that these are cultures which, unfortunately, much of the Western world are uneducated about.

And when I say that, I of course include myself. So I'd like to take this opportunity to share some of what I've learned, as well as provide some insight into my decision-making process and how I wove these foreign concepts into something (hopefully) understandable to foreign audiences. Also, I'd like to make clear that I was, and still *am*, the learner in much of what I'm about to talk about. As long as you keep that in your surely open mind—I mean, I *hope* you're open-minded if you're willing to learn more about the worldviews presented in this text—then I would be glad to be your friendly source of information.

I'm going to format this into loosely connected sections of terminology—everything from monsters, to deities, to the very specific word for the endless cycle of suffering and torment of this mortal coil that we're doomed to walk. And although there's no way I'll be getting to absolutely everything, I will endeavor to structure the things I do touch on logically and at least make it somewhat more entertaining than your average Asian Studies course.

Without further ado, our first word of the day is...

Asura

I know, too easy. But even though this is probably the least confusing thing referenced in the text, it's so prominent and important that I thought it deserved its own section. And hey, if this is your first time even seeing the word "asura," this one's for you, pal.

First and foremost, the asuras are certainly not heroes. At least, not necessarily. They are an entire class of beings who are defined by their opposition to the gods, or devas in the context of Indian religion. Sometimes

they're good, but most times they're incredibly moody and angry. You'll most often see them depicted as big, angry, multi-armed men, but there *are* female asuras called asuri.

The term itself has a long history, at first simply referring to one in power, such as a lord, and the asuras went through many image changes over the centuries. But the key takeaway from the modern and evolved form of these deities is that they're bad news, and you don't really want to find yourself reincarnated as one.

Considering that, one might be able to draw some parallels to Yu's hesitation. The Asura Frame is indeed an artificial god of destruction, very much true to its name. And you kinda don't want to make it mad.

Shifting gears a little, so the Asura Frames are asuras, huh? "Prove it," I hear you saying. "How come they're named after devas?"

First of all, wow, you did your research. I'm proud of you. Second of all, that's because it depends on which *source* you're checking. Varuna and Mitra, for example, are considered asuras in the Rigveda (a super important religious text in Hinduism), but it's only *later* that they become regarded as devas. Rudra also shares a similar lexiconical fate. So let that serve as an example of what I mean when I say our asura pals have changed over the years.

Rudra

On that note, let's talk a little bit about who Rudra actually is. He seems pretty important, after all.

Short and simple, Rudra is, you guessed it, the god of storms. But what you might not have guessed is that Rudra is essentially the very same entity as Shiva, who you might recognize a little more readily. There are complicated religious, cultural, and linguistic reasons behind that, but when someone refers to Rudra, many times he is referred to as Rudra-Shiva.

Whichever name strikes your fancy, the deity known as Rudra is considered one of the most terrifying and destructive, often depicted with a bow and associated with disease. But what's interesting is, at the same time, he is known as a healer. As much as he destroys, Rudra is said to be the greatest of physicians, and is sometimes depicted as a handsome and intelligent man.

Nagaraja

While we're on the topic of entities and people, I think this is a worthy first entry into the monster compendium.

As you may have deduced by now, if you've been paying very close attention, Fantasy Inbound's world is colored *ever so slightly* by Hindu and Buddhist mythology. Sarcasm aside, you may have already forgotten about Ein referring to a dragon as a "nagaraja" completely in passing during the destruction of Maizuru, or maybe you're frothing at the mouth for an explanation. If you're the latter, here, have some water, and let's talk about what the heck a "nagaraja" is.

Anyone who's played a JRPG or two may know that a naga is pretty much just a snake person—a lamia, if you will. It's a little more culturally complicated than that, of course, but the important thing is just knowing that the naga are serpent-like minor deities, and that they can take many forms with varying degrees of humanness.

What we're interested in are the nagaraja. Translated from Sanskrit, this literally means "king of the naga," and with our newfound knowledge of what the naga are, suddenly it sounds pretty apt for a dragon, I'd say. One of the most interesting nagarajas (of the three referenced in Hindu texts) to me is Shesha, said to hold the entire universe in his coil, and his unwinding is what causes time to flow. Should he move backwards, everything would cease to exist.

Another nagaraja, and of a little more relevance to us, is Vasuki, who rests coiled around Shiva's neck. If you're wondering whether that's important to Fantasy Inbound's imagery, I'm afraid I have no answer. But pretty coincidental, eh?

The Eight Consciousnesses

Now we'll get into some of the abstract stuff.

The Eight Consciousnesses are first referenced during Aliya's awakening experiment involving the first Devicer Three's ashes. Aliya explains briefly that the manas consciousness is the one her theory primarily deals with, but how? And I think we're missing seven others there. Worry not, I'm here to elucidate you with surface-level explanations punctuated by slightly amusing banter.

Firstly, we have to establish the core six: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and the mind. These are collectively known as the sense consciousnesses, and are largely uncontested by most schools of Buddhism. Why? Well, because there is no consciousness at all, no *experience*, without our senses, right?

All of these are self-explanatory enough, but what is the "mind"? The mind acts as a sort of mirror. It takes in the senses, interprets them, and reflects them back out as thoughts. But the thing about senses and thoughts is that it's all transient. The moment you stop seeing, there is no sight consciousness. Et cetera, et cetera.

And that's where the alaya-vijnana doctrine comes in. This is a theory proposed in Mahayana Buddhism in an attempt to explain consciousness in a way that allows for permanence, lasting impressions that in turn affect the flow of karma. And it does that with two extra consciousnesses: manas and the "storehouse."

Manas is the concept of self. It is our ego, where our self-centered desires emerge and what keeps us turning in the cycle of samsara, the cycle of life, death, and reincarnation. But manas doesn't appear out of nothing. It's derived from something. And that something is the storehouse consciousness—essentially memory. A storehouse of every experience we've

ever had, each one coloring our manas, our self. Or at least, what we perceive as our self.

Taking this back to poor Devicer Three, it is his manas, or the traces of it rather, that the Asura Frame reacts to. And perhaps you could say that it's *Yu's* developing manas that helps awaken it.

Samsara, Karma, Sunyata, and Enlightenment

I've mentioned a few fancy words so far, and you may be looking at the title of this section and going, "Okay Matt, or RoTsun, or whoever you say you are, some of those words aren't even mentioned in the text." And you'd be right. You caught me. But before you press those charges, hear me out.

Samsara, as I briefly described earlier, is the cycle of rebirth. Professor Chloe Todo mentions this when she passes, and when she does, she mentions it in the context of reaching the "end" of it. It may sound a little contradictory for a never-ending process to have an "ending," but the ultimate goal is to *escape* the cycle and attain one of the four higher states of being (which I go into a bit more later on), because the cycle, samsara, is suffering. And the perpetuation of it all, what determines just how much some lucky fellow gets to suffer, is karma.

One way or another, I assume we've all probably heard of karma, whether you know its religious origins or not. The concept is present in many cultures in the form of idioms—"What goes around, comes around" in English, for example. When I said that our egos are what keep us in the cycle of samsara, I meant that our egos are the source of karma. Karma is born from the actions we take, the thoughts we have, and those determine the circumstances of our future lives.

So then the question becomes, how does one break free from suffering and reach nirvana? That is to say, how do we attain enlightenment? Well, the key is impermanence. And while translating this volume (and subsequent volumes as I write this), I've found that understanding the elves, the way they speak, and the way they think is grounded in understanding this one concept.

Impermanence is essentially the cornerstone of Buddhism. It's present everywhere, from anatta (the non-self, dissociating from the subjective) to sunyata, and it's the latter that I want to focus on.

At its core, sunyata is about emptiness, but it's important to note that it's not a negative emptiness. The zoomers out there may relate to the positive connotations of nothing ever mattering or meaning anything, but I'll elaborate for the less hip, and for the sake of actually explaining this cultural concept in terms other than internet memes.

Basically, the absence of anything is just the potential for everything. Nothing inherently has any significance, we exist in a void, but it's within that void that things happen, that we *apply* significance to the innately impermanent. Only through understanding that, the transience of the things we experience, is enlightenment really achieved.

The Heart Sutra

Now that we have a basic understanding of the general tenets of Buddhism explained by a fumbling translator, we can talk about texts. And really, there's no better one to begin with than the most famous.

Sutras are, in short, collections of sayings and principles, and of them all, the Heart Sutra is easily the most popular. I won't be discussing it in its entirety at too much length, because I have too much tokusatsu isekai to translate to do that. But what I will do is touch on the most famous line, the one quoted in *Fantasy Inbound*: "Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha."

Ha, you thought we'd be discussing Japanese translation, but it was Sanskrit instead!

First of all, a clarification. "Gate" is not pronounced like the English word "gate." It's pronounced gah-teh. Important. Anyway with that out of the way, what it *means* is simply "gone." "Paragate" roughly means "gone to the other side," and adding "sam" to make "parasamgate" means "*everyone* gone to the other side." Lastly, "bodhi" is "enlightenment" and "svaha" is a special word that's really just an exclamation of celebration.

Put together, the excerpt can be roughly translated to, "Gone, gone, gone beyond, everyone gone beyond, oh what an awakening." As an obligatory disclaimer, this aphorism is so famous that you'll likely find a dozen different translations with slight variations. This is just my own parsing of it, put together in a way that I think makes the most sense in the context of this book.

Five elements resonate. Ten realms speak. Six senses comprise the words.

"Okay, that's all very interesting, but can you talk about *Japanese* translation please?"

Oh, fine. I was saving the best for last, because this excerpt is a doozy. I've got a lot to say about it and all the other Gospel Codes, but I think I'll be a tease and save the others for later.

This passage, the Gospel Code for unlocking the Asura Frame, is not just fancy words. Let that be clear. They are fancy words said by an *actual person*. Yes, this is a direct quote from the Buddhist monk Kukai, or Kobo Daishi, in his work concisely romanized as "Shojijissogi." Conveniently for me, it (as is the case for most Buddhist texts) has no official/readily-googleable English translation, making me the lucky fellow who gets to do it. Fortunately, however, I'm not translating an academic, historical text. I'm translating an edgy light novel. And context is king in any translation.

So with that background established, let's take this in pieces. Even though Aliya pretty much did it all for me.

—Five elements resonate.

Here we have the "godai," or □□ if you made it through Japanese 101. And as Aliya's narration so graciously explains to us (or as you brainiacs

who passed Japanese 101 may have already guessed), there are five of these: earth, water, fire, wind, and void. The exact significance of these, why they all exist, how they interact, et cetera is of little importance to us (read: me) at this very moment, but what is important to us is how they're described.

The godai—the five elements—are described as having "vibrations." *Hibiki*. Sounds, voices, resonances. And each of them has its own respective noise.

To reiterate what Aliya tells us, and to succinctly summarize this sentence, the components that make up the universe are not static. They move, vibrate, and resonate.

—Ten realms speak.

So, we have five elements, and the elements make noises. The end result? The things they *make up* can make noises. They can speak. Language. But now the question is *what* speaks? Where?

In common Buddhist thought, existence does not take place on one simple plane of reality, but ten. The "jikkai," or □□ for the smarty pants out there (you're killing it). There are six lower realms and four higher realms, each inhabited by their own forms of life of varying levels of enlightenment. The lowest of the realms is hell, and above that is the world of hunger (or the pretas, hungry spirits), followed by beasts and animals, then asuras (note how low they are in the chain), until finally we reach humanity, and above them is heaven.

Beyond even heaven are holy states of being, beginning with the sravaka (or disciples), and ascending to the pratyekabuddha, the bodhisattva, up to the highest of all: buddhahood. Complete enlightenment.

So now we have a myriad of beings and entities to populate our world of earth, water, fire, wind, and void. And because these elements resonate, the beings can communicate. Language is born.

—Six senses comprise the words.

But language does not exist in a vacuum. As we've made abundantly clear up to now, language would not even exist without interaction. While the elements give the world a voice, it is our senses that turn the chaos into order. Which is fancy talk for "our senses perceive and interpret meaning from the world."

Our eyes, ears, noses, tongues, bodies, and minds (six senses—sound familiar?) decipher all the noise and turn it into words.

You're probably wondering where I'm going with all this, other than just imparting some of my findings to other fine human beings. And I do hope some of what I've shared has been at the very least interesting, but my *real* goal here was to shine a light on a part of translation that is often buried under the prose.

Translation takes a long time. In every sense of the word, really. It takes a lifetime to master on a grander scale, but on a smaller one, it takes

months to translate a book, and sometimes days or weeks to translate a *fraction* of a piece of text. Behind the flashes of occasional genius, when you figure out that perfect way to render an “itadakimasu,” are hours and hours of simple, nose-to-the-grindstone research. And that’s something I’ve come to appreciate to a far greater degree during my work on this series.

It’s impossible to know everything, and that’s what makes translating hard. Language *is* everything. It encompasses the entire human experience. When you translate, you’re learning, and when you encounter something foreign to you, whether that be a new word or an entirely unique worldview, you take it upon yourself to understand it.

And the best translators are the people who can do that, who can see the world beyond themselves and internalize new ideas. People who have gone beyond their own egos and seek new understanding. You simply can’t experience language in a vacuum, both in the literal sense and a mental one. When you live in a box, you don’t see the entire picture.

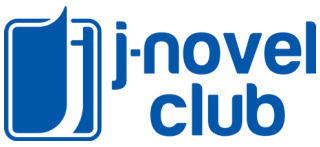
I worked some hard days on this volume. I’ll just say that much. But I think it was worth it. I didn’t *have to* spend those nights reading about sunyata, tathata, and other Buddhist tenets to try and scrounge up a modicum of understanding for this culture I have no personal experience with. I could have looked at the words, written their meaning down, and called it a day. But I would have been missing the forest for the trees. It wouldn’t have been right to deny the fact that language is connected more deeply than the denotative meaning of the words that make it up, because I would have been denying the truth.

Everything is connected, and that’s what this particular Gospel Code tells us. That’s why *this* is the one that awakens the Asura Frame to greater power.

Thanks for reading.

Table of Contents

Cover
Terminology
Prologue
Chapter 1: Project Rebirth
Chapter 2: The Flying Castle’s Reprisal
Chapter 3: Journey’s Beginning
Chapter 4: The Osakan Escape
Afterword
Color Illustrations
Bonus Translator’s Notes
About J-Novel Club
Copyright



Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter
And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 2 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Fantasy Inbound: Volume 1
by Joe Takeduki
Translated by Matthew Jackson
Edited by Callum May

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © Joe Takeduki 2020

First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Ebook edition 1.0: February 2022